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Dancers looking forward to Oakland Ballet's 'Nutcracker'



Gregory DeSantis as The Nutcracker and Ramona Kelley as Marie with The Flowers perform in Graham Lustig's "The Nutcracker" for the Oakland Ballet. (Courtesy of David DeSilva)

By **SALLY HOGARTY** | Correspondent

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OAKLAND — Some children in the Bay Area may have “sugar plums dancing in their heads” as the holiday season draws near, but just as many dream of something a bit more substantial – a nutcracker. Much more than the variety used to open nuts, this particular nutcracker can become real, magically turning its wooden self into a gallant prince.

As those looking for sugar plums will surely find recitations of “’Twas the Night Before Christmas,” those on the lookout for a version of Tchaikovsky’s “The Nutcracker” will also find one close by.

East Bay audiences have only to set their sights on Oakland for a taste of this favorite holiday treat as the Oakland Ballet presents Artistic Director Graham Lustig’s “The Nutcracker” on Dec. 23-24 at the Paramount Theatre.

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With vibrant sets, colorful costumes and smart choreography, the clever story of a young girl who falls asleep and finds herself in the Land of Sweets and much more with her beloved, and very much alive, nutcracker continues to thrill audiences of all ages.

To bring this magical story alive, Lustig combines professional dancers from Oakland Ballet with more than 40 young dancers aged 7 to 17. These talented young people enthusiastically take on the roles of snowballs, mice, soldiers and candies as they gain experience dancing alongside the company’s professionals. Adding to the extravaganza is the Mt. Eden Women’s Ensemble under the direction of Michael Morgan and his orchestra.

“I fell in love with ‘The Nutcracker’ when I saw a friend in it years ago,” recalls 15-year-old Caleb Meyers. “I really wanted to do something like that so I started taking ballet lessons and at 10 years old, I was in my first ‘Nutcracker.’”



Identical twins Noelle and Grace Hardy, both 10, are dressed as Snowballs at a Dec. 9 event at the Claremont Hotel. The twin girls will perform in the Oakland Ballet's "The Nutcracker." (Courtesy of Jacqueline Hardy)

The Oakland native has played a variety of characters during his four years in the show (he took one year off) and looks forward to being involved each season.

“There is always new choreography to learn and seeing everyone is like a big reunion. Many of them I only seen once a year when rehearsals begin,” he said.

Meyers, who attends the Oakland School of the Arts, also looks forward to the final dress rehearsals when everyone is at the Paramount Theatre together.

“I love watching all the pieces come together that final week. It’s very exciting,” he said.

While not seasoned “Nutcracker” pros like Meyers, 10-year-old identical twins Noelle and Grace Hardy are thrilled to make their debut as Sugar Plum Fairy attendants this year.

“We did the show with our youth company in Los Angeles, but this is our first professional production,” Noelle Hardy said

“Graham Lustig has such a modern take on the story and his costumes are larger than life. Everything is just visually stunning,” Grace Hardy said.

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The twins discovered Oakland Ballet’s Summer Intensive program this past year when they accompanied their mother, Jacqueline, to Fremont to help care for their grandfather.

“I was raised in Fremont and my parents still live in the house I grew up in,” Jacqueline Hardy said. “We needed to spend a good part of the summer up here helping my mom and dad so I started looking for ballet classes for the girls. We discovered Oakland Ballet, and it’s been wonderful. Graham and his instructors really educate the dancers about the history of ballet and the correct terminology, and they do it all using positive feedback. We were thrilled to continue working with them for their holiday show.”

Noelle Hardy loves having the opportunity to work with the professional dancers in “The Nutcracker” but notes it has its challenges as well.

“As Sugar Plum Fairy Attendants, we have to freeze in a particular dance position and hold it for long periods of time. That can be difficult,” she said.

“My favorite part is working with such amazing people as Graham Lustig and ballet master Bat Abbit,” Grace Hardy said. “But, learning the choreography so quickly has also been quite challenging. It’s definitely increasing our memory level. Our mom calls it the Alzheimer’s prevention program.”

Graham Lustig's "The Nutcracker" performs on Saturday, Dec. 23 at 1 p.m. and 5 p.m. and Sunday, Dec. 24 at 1 p.m. at the Paramount Theatre, 2025 Broadway, Oakland. Special Sweet Dreams children's parties follow the 1 p.m. shows on both Saturday and Sunday and are available for an additional \$15. Tickets to the performances are \$23 to \$100 with discounts for seniors, children 12 and under and groups of 10 or more. Tickets are available at the Paramount Theatre Box Office or online at www.ticketmaster.com.

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Sally Hogarty

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