

The Nutcracker goes modern

By RICK CHATENEVER
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GOING NUTS over "The Nutcracker" is nothing new for Santa Cruz, as evidenced by the number of versions of the seasonal ballet playing on local stages in recent years.

Now the classic tale is going modern, as this area's best-known dancer/choreographer takes a crack at it.

It's a modern, magical vision — set to Tchaikovsky's well-loved score and based on E.T.A. Hoffmann's story — as interpreted by the internationally-acclaimed, but still very local, Tandy Beal.

"Since April 1st, I have probably listened to the score twice a day," joked Tandy, during a recent break from rehearsals. "I have dreamed with it — the music is so beautiful."

Her "Nutcracker" — complete with a mostly-local cast of more than 70 dancers, acrobats, jugglers, roller skaters and mimes — will have its gala premiere Dec. 16 at 7:30 p.m. in the UCSC Performing Arts Theater. The evening performances continue through Dec. 19 at 7:30, with 3 p.m. matinees Dec. 18 and 19.

Beal, a longtime member of the Cabrillo dance staff who won "bravos!" during a 1981 concert tour of Europe and has been heralded as one of the West Coast's best choreographers, allows her excitement to show when she speaks about this bit of Christmas delight which will bring her to the stage in the role of the Sugar Plum Fairy.

"It's great!" she says, her eyes growing wide. "It's a big huge community event."

The idea for creating a new "Nutcracker" came about one day several years ago when Tandy, her longtime dance partner Ron Taylor and composer Jon Scoville (co-artistic director of Tandy Beal and Company) were driving back from a performance in San Diego. The performance hadn't gone all that well and the dancers weren't in the best of spirits . . . until Scoville put on a tape which happened to include excerpts from the immortal



Tandy Beal

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel



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Nonny Hille, Jean Leavenworth and Sara Wilbourne in scene from Christmas classic.

Tchaikovsky score.

Tandy recalls "getting all giddy." Scoville noted the reaction, and made the only slightly impossible suggestion — that she re-choreograph the ballet.

Once she decided to do it, "our first impulse was to throw out the storyline and just do a big Christmas production," she recalls. "But after more and more listening, I realized it's a nice legend. The music is so much a tone poem, but if you just listen to it, the story unfolds."

Beal's version doesn't discard E.T.A. Hoffmann's story — originally entitled "The Nutcracker and the Mouse King" — so much as use it as a starting point.

"My story is different," she explains. "The mouse king doesn't get killed — but he does lose. We have jazz mice . . ."

Granted, a stage full of dancing chocolates and candies might not seem quite so wondrous to today's computer age tykes as they did to youngsters at the turn-of-the-century — but there's still plenty of enchantment in "The Nutcracker's" symbolism.

"This is the first version done by a contemporary choreographer," she goes on. "I haven't done it in a contemporary idiom, but have done what needed to be done for the piece. There's still the Christmas Eve party . . . the tree grows . . . and the mice come."

When casting the piece, she found some really accomplished dancers auditioning to be mice, or the two-person team in the dog suit. And as for the tree, which, appears to grow, right on stage — ?

"That dumb tree," exclaims Tandy. "You can blow your whole production budget on it."

While her imagination has taken flight with the time-honored story, Beal is equally charged about all the community participation in this flamboyant venture.

Bill Shipley and Barbara Lingafelter, Where she'll have to be January is back

on tour, as Tandy Beal and Company hit the road again. In March she will go back to do choreography for the Baltimore Opera's "Porgy and Bess."

"I think I'm interested in doing lots of different kinds of things," she says of that opportunity. "I'm interested in anything — I'm just interested in the craft of choreography."

But for the time being, that choreography revolves around the ethereal joys of "The Nutcracker."

"It's very, very joyful," says Tandy. "I have probably never worked on a show that has had this excitement before. That's not to say there haven't been black holes in space — but I know it's going to work out. So many things have happened right, it's like it has pixie dust on it." both active in other artistic fields, make their debuts as dancers in the roles of Drosselmeyer and Clara's mother. Ron Taylor is the enchanted prince and Ellen Sevy is Clara. Members of other dance companies, including Jean Ahern-Dunphy with Thatcher Clarke and Patri Nader's Spanish troupe, are eager participants. Donna White, an old friend of Tandy's, is flying in from Utah where she teaches, to perform a 45-second cameo. Lighting designer Evan White is flying in from the Baltimore Opera. "He's going to be in heaven," says Beal.

Norvid Roos did the set — growing tree and all — which Beal says is the largest to ever go into the UCSC theater. Elaine Yokoyama Roos designed the costumes, described by Beal merely as "spectacular."

Tandy sees "something about the spirit of Christmas, a wonderful generosity," that's part of the current preparations. The production is so large, it is being rehearsed in pieces "in 15 different places in the county — people's garages, my studio, the skating rink."

"I'm completely crazy," she laughs, "I never know where I have to be next."