

What's a million-dollar 'Nutcracker' look like?

New gift reshapes annual holiday classic

by Lawrence Toppman :: The Charlotte Observer

Things age so fast in ballet. Dancers break down as quickly as other athletes. Costumes, frayed by a hundred lifts and a thousand pirouettes, lose sequins and sparkle. Sets begin to fade, crack and sag.

So when Hugh McColl came to Jean-Pierre Bonnefoux with a hefty donation — one meant to honor wife Jane Spratt McColl and provide something that would reach the largest possible audience — the artistic director of Charlotte Ballet knew what he wanted.

"People outside ballet don't realize what an impact sets and costumes make," says Bonnefoux. "Every year we have money to redo them in a small way, but we have never had the opportunity to build this show from the bottom up with great designers.

You'll see the results, which have been in preparation for 18 months, in December. The million-dollar "Nutcracker" debuts at Belk Theater Dec. 2-3 before heading to Charleston's Gaillard Auditorium for a week. It returns to the Belk Dec. 13-23, with Christopher James Lees conducting the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra. (He's new, too.)

Bonnefoux hired heavyweights he respected from his time dancing and choreographing for New York City Ballet: set designer Alain Vaes and costume designer Holly Hynes. He gave them free rein, with one concept in mind:

"It had to be bright, festive, like beautiful paper wrapping a present. Everything will be larger than life. It's a strong feeling of fantasy, seen more from the point of view of a child than an adult. The tree should go up so high that if you are a kid, you can look under it and see all the toys."

Hynes had just finished a new "Nutcracker" for Kansas City Ballet but vowed to give Charlotte its own production. She changed the holiday party to a fancy dress ball, with whimsical hats and frocks. Bonnefoux introduced a mirror, so each guest could stop for a moment of reflection and show off Hynes' creations. "My thought is that Clara goes to bed with all of these fun colors and imaginative shapes, (then) dreams about them in Act 2," she says.

"There are hidden references to Charlotte sports teams throughout the ballet, which was a lot of fun. The only artist I mimicked was the artist formally known as Prince. Can you find

him?" (That's called "an Easter egg" online or on a DVD: an unexpected or undocumented surprise.)

Vaeshas designed seven Nutcrackers, but he dug for fresh ideas. "The Nutcracker is the dream of a child; there is only one way to interpret it," he says. "I am a children's book author and illustrator, and all my life I have worked hard to keep that sense of wonder that comes from childhood. (But) I am also a figurative artist with a surrealist tendency."

Thus the massive hot-air balloon that now carries Clara and the Prince away at the end, or the oversized teacup in which the nefarious Mouse King makes his entrance. Bonnefoux asked Vaes to design a series of cutouts that both conceal action until we're ready to see it and add verisimilitude. The Snow King and Queen will emerge from a field of deer; the toy soldiers will stream out of a castle; Mother Ginger will roll out in the upper floor of a house, out of which her brood will pour. (The old set will be sold eventually; the new one could potentially be rented out.)

The changes allowed Bonnefoux to adjust choreography, and he's adding a gopak (a double-time Ukrainian folk dance) by Tchaikovsky to the divertissements in Act 2. (He had already introduced a piece of music from the ballet "Swan Lake" there.)

Everything about the show will be new to



The marzipan and candy cane costumes were the first to be finished; in all, costumers created 208 full costumes and 760 individual pieces.

Photo Credit: Justine Miller (jmiller@mcclatchy.com)

Hugh McColl, who chose Charlotte Ballet for the gift because his wife values dance most among all the arts.

"If you'd told me (before marriage) I would ever go to a ballet, I'd have laughed at you," he says. But she took him to see Rudolf Nureyev decades ago in Spartanburg, made a dance fan of him — they recently went to New York

to watch Misty Copeland perform — and his favorite part of the Charlotte Ballet season is now the adventurous Innovative Works. "Nutcracker," though....

"I have never seen it," he says. "I'm going this year for the first time." ::

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