

Local ballet invests in 'Nutcracker'

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County's 'Nutcracker' gets more sugar

Russian backdrops give performances a stunning boost

Karen Lindell Special to Ventura County Star
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The freight terminal at LAX is bulging with cargo destined for Southland holiday gift-getters. One shipment that arrived this week — ultimate destination Ventura County — was exceptionally large, rare and Russian.

On Monday, Kathleen Noblin, executive director of Ventura County Ballet, went to LAX to pick up five new scenic backdrops hand-painted in Russia for the dance company's 20th-anniversary staging of "The Nutcracker," with performances Saturday and Sunday in Oxnard and Dec. 7-9 in Ventura.

The 28-by-50-foot backdrops were created by Russian artist Yuri Samodurov of the venerable Perm Tchaikovsky Opera and Ballet Theatre.

Noblin said Ventura County Ballet usually rents backdrops for its "Nutcracker" shows, but the cost has increased considerably, from around \$200 up to \$550 per drop for multiple scenes. The company decided it would be a sound investment to purchase its own backdrops and also rent them to others.

The backdrops include one for the prologue depicting a façade of a majestic old mansion; a parlor inside the estate; the Land of Snow; Candyland; and a Christmas tree scene.

"The whole stage will look like a storybook," Noblin said.

Ventura County Ballet isn't the only local dance company celebrating a "Nutcracker" milestone. Ventura-based Footworks Youth Ballet will present its 15th-anniversary "Nutcracker" Dec. 8-9 in Oxnard. And Pacific Festival Ballet,



New York City Ballet's guest artists, Tiler Peck and Gonzalo Garcia, will be returning as Sugar Plum Fairy and Cavalier for their ninth consecutive year at the Pacific Festival Ballet.
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the resident ballet company at the Thousand Oaks Civic Arts Plaza, will stage its 25th-anniversary production Dec. 15-16. The group's first "Nutcracker" at the Civic Arts Plaza took place just six weeks after the venue opened in 1994.

The Sugar Plum Fairy will also make appearances this month in "Nutcrackers" by the Conejo Civic Ballet, Dec. 9; California Dance Ensemble, Dec. 15-16; and Moorpark Civic Ballet, Dec. 23.

At most of the shows, professional dancers from national, international and regional ballet companies perform, along with local students and dancers.

Local dance companies say their "Nutcracker" productions have changed over the years, with larger casts, more experienced dancers, increasingly elaborate sets and fancier costumes. They haven't done much to the ballet itself,

If you go

Ventura County Ballet (Oxnard): 2 p.m. Saturday and Sunday, Oxnard Performing Arts Center, 800 Hobson Way, with the Ventura College Symphony Orchestra, and a free Sugar Plum Party for children at 1 p.m. Tickets: \$30-\$45 general, \$20-\$45 military/seniors, \$9.50-\$45 children 12 and younger. 486-2424 or www.etix.com.

Ventura County Ballet (Ventura): 7 p.m. Dec. 7, 2 and 7 p.m. Dec. 8, 2 p.m. Dec. 9, Ventura College Performing Arts Center, 4700 Loma Vista Road, with the Ventura College Symphony Orchestra. Tickets: \$40 general, \$35 military/seniors, \$25 children younger than age 10. www.brownpapertickets.com.

Footworks Youth Ballet: 2 p.m. Dec. 8-9, Oxnard Performing Arts Center, 800 Hobson Way, with the Footworks Community Orchestra and Carpe Diem Chorus. Tickets: \$19-\$29 general; \$19-\$27 military, seniors and children age 10 and younger. 486-2424 or www.etix.com.

Conejo Civic Ballet: 2:30 p.m. Dec. 9, Fred Kavli Theatre, Thousand Oaks Civic Arts Plaza, 2100 E. Thousand Oaks Blvd. Tickets: \$20-\$36. 800-745-3000 or www.ticketmaster.com.

California Dance Ensemble: 2 and 7 p.m. Dec. 15, 1 and 5:30 p.m. Dec. 16, Calabasas Performing Arts Education Center, Calabasas High School, 22855 W. Mulholland Highway, Calabasas. Tickets: \$22-\$37. 818-889-8058, ext. 1; or performingarts.lvusd.org.

Pacific Festival Ballet: 2 and 7 p.m. Dec. 15-16, Fred Kavli Theatre, Thousand Oaks Civic Arts Plaza, 2100 E. Thousand Oaks Blvd. Tickets: \$31-\$47. 800-745-3000 or www.ticketmaster.com.

Moorpark Civic Ballet: 2 and 6:30 p.m. Dec. 23, Agoura Performing Arts Education Center, Agoura High School, 28545 W. Driver Ave., Agoura Hills. Tickets: \$35-\$40. 818-889-8058, ext. 1; or www.ticketmaster.com.

however, mostly sticking to the tried-and-true story, Tchaikovsky's score and traditional choreography.

"One has to honor the classics," Noblin said. "I'm not one for making something silly out of it, or abbreviating it."

Kim Maselli, Pacific Festival Ballet artistic director, agreed. "We always do a traditional version," she said.

Cute-as-peppermint candies and wispy snowflakes waltz and twirl. Good ol' Uncle Drosselmeyer delivers the key prop. Clara and her toy-turned-dance man Nutcracker Prince leap into a fairytale stage partnership. Toy soldiers battle royal or military mice/rats with as much grace as they can muster. And the Sugar Plum Fairy enchants everyone

with her airy moves.

Moorpark Civic Ballet's Eve of Christmas Eve "Nutcracker" at the Agoura Performing Arts Education Center does take one liberty with the story, shaking up the rat contingent. Director Pam Rossi said she added a Rat Queen character 20 years ago to provide some comic relief and "give the Rat King a sidekick."

Whichever "Nutcracker" you choose, Noblin hopes audiences see the value in taking children to see a live dance performance.

"On TV, everything's perfect," she said. "Nobody trips, and there are no miscues. When you see a ballet right in front of you, you can see the sweat and work involved."