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Title

Transcript

Story by Maddie Orton

["A Little Wiggle" MUSIC]

MADDIE ORTON, HOST (VOICEOVER):

I'm Maddie Orton and you're listening to the Jersey Arts Podcast.

It's that time of year again when sugarplum fairies start dancing through my head and I can't wait to indulge in all of my favorite holiday traditions—homemade hot cocoa, jazz by the fireplace, my annual screening of A Charlie Brown Christmas, and lots of sweets.

For more than a decade, Jersey City has had its own special tradition: Nimbus Dance's Jersey City Nutcracker. The city-centric show runs from December 9th through 23rd at the new Nimbus Arts Center.

I chatted first with Founding Artistic Director Sam Pott, who choreographed and co-wrote the piece and Harumi Elders, Nimbus's School Director, and then with student dancer Izzy Baculod, who plays one of the lead characters. So snuggle up, pour yourself a nice cup of hot cocoa, and take a listen!

["Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy" MUSIC]

MADDIE ORTON, HOST

Thanks so much for joining me. Let's talk about Nutcracker. For anyone who might not know, why do we see so many Nutcracker performances everywhere this time of year, outside of, you know, the joy of the holiday season?

SAMUEL POTT, FOUNDING ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, NIMBUS DANCE

Yeah. I mean, Nutcracker is a staple in the dance world, particularly in the ballet world, where, you know, there is a range of productions from months-long runs that happen at, you know, in New York City at the New York City Ballet, but every major city has, you know, a long production run of Nutcracker. And I think for—the reasons for that are there's kind of a lot of different angles to, you know, to think about, but, you know, there's financially, Nutcracker is a big ticket seller and draws a big audience. And then, you know, Nutcracker is also kind of embedded in the tradition of ballet. It's one of

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Tchaikovsky's famous ballets that he wrote the score for. So it's kind of ingrained into, you know, the kind of centuries-long tradition of ballet.

MADDIE ORTON, HOST

And then, Harumi, you're the School Director. How does Nutcracker often fit in with education programs?

HARUMI ELDERS, SCHOOL DIRECTOR

I think it's a great opportunity for students to have their first performance opportunity. You know, coming from a young age, you start from you're a cookie, and then you graduate to an angel, and then you graduate to, for us, it's called a "ribbon", sometimes it's called "tea". So it gives students, like, kind of a way to continue to grow as performers and to continue to step their technique up to their next level, something to strive for each season.

MADDIE ORTON, HOST

And did you both go through sort of the Nutcracker process yourselves as performers growing up?

HARUMI ELDERS, SCHOOL DIRECTOR

I did. Yeah, I did. And that was kind of my journey as well. Stepping up from a cookie—I was called a "gingerbread", into—we were called "cherubs", into "tea" and "coffee"—all of those things that we call "ribbons" and "gente"—we still have those traditions for our students to look forward to. So it's a tradition that, you know, as a performer hasn't changed year after year. It's still something that we look forward to as performers. And that I get to see my now students looking forward to.

MADDIE ORTON, HOST

Oh, sure. Sam, what about you? Did you do this?

SAMUEL POTT, FOUNDING ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, NIMBUS DANCE

Not really, no. I mean, my background with dance is that I started really late in kind of training formally, so I did perform in many, many Nutcracker productions, but they were all starting at kind of college age, you know. I had the opportunity to kind of jump in as a guest performer, to partner the students at a few ballet studios out in the Bay Area. And then and then joined the Oakland Ballet, where Nutcracker was a big, you know, a big feature of their season. And then when I moved to New Jersey and danced with the American Repertory Ballet, also, Nutcracker is kind of a big, big production for them. So, you know, I performed in a lot of Nutcrackers, but I didn't have the childhood of progressing through the ranks that Harumi is talking about.

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MADDIE ORTON, HOST

You know, I've been on the audience side of Nutcracker many, many, many times, and I love it. What are your favorite parts of Nutcracker from the stage having performed it yourselves?

HARUMI ELDERS, SCHOOL DIRECTOR

I mean, there's something so magical about the music. As soon as the music comes on, the lights come on, here's like a—there's a feeling that happens. So I was thinking about your first question about why do we see so many? And I think also, it becomes a holiday tradition. For me, there's Thanksgiving, and there's Nutcracker, and then there's Christmas. You know, it's a part of it's a part of your holiday season.

So from a performance standpoint, the music is just so iconic. And it brings that, you know, that holiday spirit. And then as a dancer, of course, you love to dance to that music.

SAMUEL POTT, FOUNDING ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, NIMBUS DANCE

Yeah. I think that in the dance world, I mean, there's there's so many interesting things to talk about in this conversation, but I think in the dance world, there's relatively few kind of dances, pieces of music that we associate with dance that are really kind of deeply ingrained into the culture. You know, Nutcracker is definitely one of them.

You know, people know the music. They know the name Nutcracker. You know, I was trying to I was thinking about this idea earlier today and kind of what are some of the other ways that, as a culture, we interact with dance, and where is it that dance has kind of a draw on on a kind of, you know, on a level that that really resonates with a lot of people? And, you know, I mean, I think that Alvin Ailey has a tradition with doing a month-long run at City Center in New York City. And it's come to have that—come to have that same kind of resonance. People know the work Revelations very well. They know the music. They may have seen it many times, but it still is something that they come back to, you know. And then thinking about other kind of cultural figures that have been really kind of connected to dance, and and have created a kind of a pervasive awareness about, you know, dance, and and then thinking about figures like Bob Fosse and his his work, which, you know, keep returning to Broadway in Chicago and various others that people still don't get tired of. You know, and other pop, kind of popular entertainment icons like Michael Jackson. And, you know, people know the moonwalk from Michael Jackson. And, you know, that's something that's just ingrained. You know, we know the music. And Nutcracker is like that. It's just so pervasive, you know, whether you're a dancer or not. People hear the music and they know Nutcracker, and that's something that's very powerful about it.

MADDIE ORTON, HOST

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I was noticing that, too. You know, I think that you almost don't realize how many places you hear the music from Nutcracker, especially this time of year. But I was watching an episode of Bluey with my son, and there's a moment where they're sort of, like, trying to get at each other's ice cream cones, and the music is "Waltz of the Flowers." And I was like, 'Oh, I know this! This is great.' My son's watching it with totally new eyes and ears. So it was yeah, it's everywhere for sure.

["Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy" MUSIC]

MADDIE ORTON, HOST

Why did you decide to adapt Nutcracker and how did you come up with the idea of setting it in Jersey City?

SAMUEL POTT, FOUNDING ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, NIMBUS DANCE

Well, having like, having this background of performing in Nutcracker for several different ballet companies and recognizing the kind of box office clout that it has, you know, I realized there was a real opportunity—there was not a Nutcracker production in Jersey City at that time. So it's an opportunity to create work for dancers and to give audience members a reason to come to a show that, you know, that's recognizable to them.

But with that as a start, the next question was, well, what kind of production would we do? We're a contemporary dance organization, you know, we're not we're not a ballet company. There's aspects of the kind of the classic Nutcracker that I think are very compelling and very appealing. You know, the magic of toys that come alive is, you know, kids just love that, you know, and kind of these figures like the Rat King who's like, you know, the king of the rats who comes out and has a sword fight with The Nutcracker. I mean, you know, it's it's a lot of fun and, you know, and then and then kind of these characters, like the Sugar Plum Fairy that are, you know, beautiful, kind of fun, quintessential moments to showcase, you know, beautiful technical dancing. You know, I wanted to hold onto some of those, but I think the underlying question was, you know, if Nutcracker took place in Jersey City, who would the characters be? And so we attempted to kind of basically fill the story with—its all characters that you might meet in Jersey City.

MADDIE ORTON, HOST

Okay. I'm trying to go through my head, who—what I would do here. Statue of Liberty? Statue of Liberty is in there?

HARUMI ELDERS, SCHOOL DIRECTOR

She may be—she may have an appearance. Yes. Okay.

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MADDIE ORTON, HOST

Okay. Very cool. You tell me, who did you go with? What did you decide?

SAMUEL POTT, FOUNDING ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, NIMBUS DANCE

For any history buffs out there, there's a character—there's Mayor Hague. Mayor Hague was for several decades, basically ran the town in Jersey City as the mayor and was notoriously corrupt and kind of gave Jersey City its reputation as a down and dirty, you know, kind of, slightly, uh, crime, a crime-ridden city. Corrupt. He's—he's in it.

But I think the other element to this is important is that Nutcracker, the kind of the classic versions of Nutcracker, have many roles in them that are somewhat problematic, somewhat stereotypical. You know, the second act of Nutcracker is like it's these many kind of various exotic characters. There's the Arabian pas de deux, which is, I think, supposed to represent, kind of, this sultry woman from a harem or something. And, you know, and then there's the Chinese dance that's kind of this stereotypical Chinese dance. It's not authentic at all. So we wanted to, like I said, make characters that were a little more authentic to people you'd meet in Jersey City. So, for example, instead of the Arabian couple, it's "the bridge and tunnel couple."

MADDIE ORTON, HOST

Oh, gosh.

SAMUEL POTT, FOUNDING ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, NIMBUS DANCE

And they're kind of like this gaudy, new, typical New Jersey couple out for a night on the town and they're bickering. And so it's...

MADDIE ORTON, HOST

Oh, I love it.

SAMUEL POTT, FOUNDING ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, NIMBUS DANCE

...It's pretty fun. The story is about two youth—one from a poor background, one from a more well-to-do background, and they're best friends and they have an adventure in Jersey City where they kind of explore the city and they get into trouble. Some bullies come in and try to steal their—they find a nutcracker, which some bullies come and try to steal. Whereas the the original classic production of Nutcracker, really the first act takes place in a kind of an aristocratic household holiday party—

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Most insane Christmas party you've ever seen. Yeah, every time I see a Nutcracker, I'm like, whose holiday party is this?!

SAMUEL POTT, FOUNDING ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, NIMBUS DANCE

Yeah, yeah. And it's, it's based on a folk story from by E.T.A. Hoffman, you know, written in Germany in the mid 1800s.

MADDIE ORTON, HOST

Wow.

SAMUEL POTT, FOUNDING ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, NIMBUS DANCE

So, you know, kind of amazing that that story has persisted and, you know, kind of continues to be told. But we really wanted to convey a storyline, which I worked on with New Jersey playwright Alysia Souder to reflect a story that today's kids could relate to. That reflects where they where they live, and where they grow up, and kind of the types of settings that they're more likely to frequent.

MADDIE ORTON, HOST

That's great.

HARUMI ELDERS, SCHOOL DIRECTOR

So the beautiful thing about them is as an organization, we're so community-oriented, and what better way to bring our community together than to have the setting of The Nutcracker be their home and our home?

MADDIE ORTON, HOST

What role do the students play in the performance? How much of this is student-led? How much of this is the Nimbus company? How does that work?

HARUMI ELDERS, SCHOOL DIRECTOR

So it's a great collaboration of students and company dancers, and some community members. We have about 70—a little over 70 youth performers within the entire performance.

MADDIE ORTON, HOST

Wow!

HARUMI ELDERS, SCHOOL DIRECTOR

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Oh yeah. And they play, they play mostly—they have some roles in the first act, but mostly in the second act. We have our Liberty Angels, those are our 6 to 8 year olds, and our cookies who dance alongside Mama Cannoli, and they're five year olds. Soldiers, and breakers, and our rats and bullies, who are in the battle scene with our Rat King and Nutcracker. Also, our lead dancers are also youth performers from the School of Nimbus.

[“Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy” MUSIC]

MADDIE ORTON (VOICEOVER):

One of these youth performers is Nimbus student Izzy Baculod who plays “Chris”, a lead character in the show similar to the role of Clara or Marie in a traditional production of The Nutcracker.

IZZY BACULOD, STUDENT DANCER

This is my eighth year doing Nutcracker, but I've played different roles, so this is only my third year as “Chris”.

MADDIE ORTON, HOST

Wow, your eighth year. What are the other roles you've played in Nutcracker?

IZZY BACULOD, STUDENT DANCER

So first I was a “cookie”, It's like one of the little kid dances, and that was when I was at a different studio and Nimbus was just doing outreach there. And then at that same studio I did “B-boys and B-Girls”, and then when I actually went to Nimbus, I did “Waltz”, “Ribbons”, “Gente”, which is the fan dance, “Rats”, and “Chris”! So, I think I hit all of them.

MADDIE ORTON, HOST

Yeah, that's a lot. I mean, we were talking a little bit about sort of that experience of working your way up through the ranks, for lack of a better term. Does it sort of feel like that? Is each year a little bit more exciting as you move up to older and older characters?

IZZY BACULOD, STUDENT DANCER

Yeah, definitely, because when I was my first year at Nimbus, I was only doing Waltz, and all my other peers there were older, they were more experienced than me, and they were all getting more roles. Not really, but like more parts of the dance. Like, for example, in Waltz, there's like a duet part. I didn't get the do it part until like third or fourth year, simply because like you have to work up to that part. And each year you, you are trusted with more things. And it's a nice feeling, but it's also like a feeling of “I have to step up to the plate and do my part.” So it's equal parts exciting and nerve-wracking, but yeah.

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MADDIE ORTON, HOST

What do you think about having that totally specific tradition around the holidays every year? Is it something that you've come to look forward to?

IZZY BACULOD, STUDENT DANCER

Yeah, I joke about it a lot with my friends. I'm like, "Oh my gosh, the 'Waltz' music is like ingrained into my head." But truthfully, it is something that I do really look forward to because I love working with this group, and especially with the team that I have now. I've really grown to appreciate dancing with all of them and working with the company members as well. So it's it is something I look forward to, and something that I make sure, like, "I can't—I can't do this today. I have the rehearsal, so I have to go."

MADDIE ORTON, HOST

And that becomes the thing for, I mean a big chunk of probably your fall and winter. Nutcracker is pretty all encompassing.

IZZY BACULOD, STUDENT DANCER

Yeah. I'm in rehearsals like just, just today I had rehearsal from 9 to 4:30. So, all day I was there just doing Nutcracker.

MADDIE ORTON, HOST

I should say, we're recording this on a weekend. So you're not skipping school, just in case anybody is listening.

IZZY BACULOD, STUDENT DANCER

Yeah, no, I'm not skipping school!

MADDIE ORTON, HOST

They're not skipping school! This is a Saturday that we're recording this. But yeah! A lot of hours!

IZZY BACULOD, STUDENT DANCER

Yeah. So I already had like a super hectic schedule, and going into senior year, all I had to do was, like, lessen it a little, because I think two or three years ago, at some point, I was taking like ten classes a week, including rehearsals. So all I had to do was just lessen it to make room for, for college applications and like the homework I was getting and all that. So time management, that's all it is.

MADDIE ORTON, HOST

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Are you doing homework at rehearsal?

IZZY BACULOD, STUDENT DANCER

Oh, yeah, I do homework at Nimbus every day.

MADDIE ORTON, HOST

For you being on stage, I feel like it's probably a very different experience, obviously, than being in the audience. What do you most look forward to during any given performance?

IZZY BACULOD, STUDENT DANCER

Hmm, seeing the audience's reaction actually. Because Nimbus' theater is, it's a lot smaller. Like you see all the big theaters in, like, New York, the stage is here and then there's like a space and then the audience is here. It's very clear, very separate. But at Nimbus, you're right there in front of the people.

So I remember like one show I had, I was doing "Waltz", and I was front and center, and in front of me was like this kid. She had like this huge smile on her face. Like, she was so into it and like, I could just see everyone's reactions, and it's just so nice to watch, and it's really motivating too. Like, "Waltz" is a hard dance. I get very tired doing that dance, so then I'm like on my last leg, and I see that person smiling in the front, and I'm like, 'Okay, I have to finish this.'

MADDIE ORTON, HOST

Oh, I love that. One of the things that I've always thought was so cool about Nutcracker is that dance students get the opportunity to perform onstage with professionals. What is that experience like for you?

IZZY BACULOD, STUDENT DANCER

Personally, it was like—Nutcracker my first time working with professional dancers, and for me it was a very humbling and very motivating experience. Personally, like, I want to work as a dancer in the future. So that's the path that I feel fits me the best. Like, I love dance, why not do it as a job?

So getting these opportunities to work with professionals, I really get to study how they act in rehearsals, the do's and don'ts. I get to see how they take care of their bodies because rehearsals can be long. I see people, like, rolling out in the corner, they've got tennis balls under their foot. And I also get to ask them questions. Like these are the moments where I can really ask like, "Hey, what's this, this, this in the choreo? How are these shows going to work out?" Like, it's just a good opportunity for me to study how they carry themselves in these types of rehearsals, so I can learn a lot from them just by watching—and watching them dance!

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[“Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy” MUSIC]

MADDIE ORTON, HOST

This has become its own tradition at this point, right? How many years of Jersey City Nutcracker are you going on?

SAMUEL POTT, FOUNDING ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, NIMBUS DANCE

This will be the 12th season.

MADDIE ORTON, HOST

Wow.

SAMUEL POTT, FOUNDING ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, NIMBUS DANCE

So, yeah. And our organization has been around for 17 years, and in a way, this production has grown with Nimbus as a dance company, and as an arts organization. The first renditions of Nutcracker were staged at a local church, Grace Church Van Vorst, who allowed us to do this, you know, use their space for free. That consisted of just one act. It was only the second act. The first act was narrated and, you know, a couple of years later, we actually enacted the first act, so that it's now the full, you know, two-act production.

And then a couple of years after that, we expanded the sets and scenery of the, of the production. So we worked with two Jersey City-based video artists, Laia Cabrera and Isabelle Duverger, who designed an interactive video set design that is really just visually stunning, that helps tell the story and makes the sets come alive.

So as kind of as our company and our organization have grown, this production has also kind of grown into its scope and scale, and come from being something that was very much just a do-it-yourself type of thing with painted plywood sets, and now it's really a full-scale production.

So it's—we're also presenting it this year, the second year at the Nimbus Arts Center, which is the facility that we opened a couple of years ago in Jersey City. So it's nice to be able to welcome people into this beautiful facility, to experience the holiday tradition of Jersey City Nutcracker.

MADDIE ORTON, HOST

That's so exciting! I hope it does very well for you guys. I'm super excited to catch it this year. So congratulations on another successful year of Jersey City Nutcracker!

HARUMI ELDERS, SCHOOL DIRECTOR

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Thank you!

MADDIE ORTON (VOICEOVER):

For more information on Jersey City Nutcracker, visit: NimbusDance.org.

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A transcript of this podcast, as well as links to related content and more about the arts in New Jersey can be found on JerseyArts.com.

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I'm Maddie Orton for the Jersey Arts Podcast. Thanks for listening.

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