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PHOTOGRAPHS: CHERYL MANN

Marie still spins through a Christmas Eve fantasy world in The Joffrey Ballet's updated *The Nutcracker*, but now her dream unfolds in Chicago.

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STAGE PRESENTS

Hang onto your seat—The Joffrey Ballet has given *The Nutcracker* a whole new scene.

WRITERS Ann Klein and Kit Bernardi

Try serving the turkey without stuffing some year and you'll understand what The Joffrey Ballet in Chicago gambled when it rolled out a wholly revamped production of *The Nutcracker* in 2016.

Even with acclaimed choreographer Christopher Wheeldon as its creative mastermind and the Tchaikovsky score intact, the new version leaped into risky territory—holiday-memories-wise, anyway—when it switched up the beloved ballet's familiar storyline and characters.

In the new version, Marie is an Eastern European immigrant girl in pre-World's Fair Chicago, and the nutcracker-gifting Herr Drosselmeyer is a take on acclaimed Chicago architect Daniel Burnham, who oversaw development of the 1893 fair's 150 buildings.

Paris-born Fabrice Calmels plays that role on some nights. On others, he's an Arabian dancer who, with dancer Christine Rocas, electrifies the house with a super-steamy variation on the previous production's already-pretty-hot Arabian dance.

The world's tallest ballet dancer at 6-foot-6, Fabrice is also a bit of a celeb. His 108,000 Instagram followers heart photos of his rehearsals and performances as a lead dancer for The Joffrey; his snuggly cat, Bella; and modeling gigs that happen to (pretty often) feature his cobblestone abs.

We chatted with Fabrice about what it takes to dance and love the new production, which runs December 1-30.





Chinese dancers and fairgoers swirl through Marie's dream against a reimagined World's Fair backdrop in the new *The Nutcracker*, with music by the Chicago Philharmonic.

WHAT'S NEW, CHICAGO?

Choreographer Christopher Wheeldon gave Robert Joffrey's 1987 version a history-steeped makeover.

1

THE CHARACTERS

Rich girl Marie (sometimes called Clara) is reimagined as the daughter of a widowed sculptress working on the 1893 Chicago World's Fair's iconic *Statue of the Republic*. Toy-maker Herr Drosselmeyer is now a dashing fair exec, The Great Impresario.

2

THE SETTING

Both ballets open at a Christmas Eve party, but the lush Victorian home in Joffrey's original version makes way for a shack for immigrant workers constructing buildings before the fair.

In Act Two, Marie's dance through the Kingdom of Sweets becomes a stroll through a dreamy fair midway filled with dancers from around the world.

3

THE EXTRAS

The original Marie and Nutcracker Prince battled mice portrayed by costumed kids. In Wheeldon's version, rat puppets scamper and hop in the hands of dancers and puppeteers.

His production also projects video over scenery, like when the Christmas tree magically grows in Act One.

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Find Fabrice (and Bella) plus #behindthescenes ballet shots @fabricealmels on Instagram.



FABRICE'S SCENE

What's it like being in Chicago for *The Nutcracker* season? Oh! [*shivers*]

Winter and cold remind you of your past injuries.

What do you want for Christmas? I would love to have all my family come and see me dance *The Nutcracker*. I am alone here, and they are in Europe.

Favorite places in Chicago? I like [gastropub] Owen & Engine. It's a

wonderful, warm place and feels like home. Portions are pretty large, and the food is consistently prepared well. As a Frenchman, I tell you that I appreciate good food.



An Arabian dance offers a hypnotizing break in a show that packs its stage with dancers performing to intense musical scores.

Q Other cities have developed their own variations on *The Nutcracker*. What does Chicago's do best?

A The brilliant part is to see something that speaks directly to the Chicago audience. The World's Fair paired with *The Nutcracker* makes complete sense with its props, magical aspects and transformations.

I also like how this performance makes a full circle of the story. Everyone wants a great ending and wants to see the underdog achieve happiness, and we've got that. Having the story be proper to Chicago makes it even better.

Q What does this new version require of you as a performer?

A When you are the lead dancer, every person on stage is waiting for you to hit the exact spot, unlock the curtain a certain way, be in the lights at a certain point. The Great Impresario is a key character that moves the story forward, and dancing [the role] is also very challenging from a technical aspect. Christopher did not give space for mistakes. There are a lot of technical executions, and if they do not go well, the curtain must go down.

Q With stakes so high, how do you ensure that those technical executions go well?

A The Great Impresario has to reveal the nutcracker doll in a particular way for the audience to see it. So I have a routine before every show. First I check the nutcracker. The scarf that covers it is a silky, slippery fabric. I have to wrap and fold the cloth just right so when I grab it onstage [*pantomimes*], the fabric pulls clear. I have four seconds to reveal the nutcracker. They're fast movements, all done while dancing, and the dancer has to get it right every time.

Q How should audiences approach the new production to fully enjoy it?

A Come to the performance with an open mind, because this is a different story. It is related to the original ballet, but it's not the same. If you hold on to the old version of *The Nutcracker*, you won't experience the new story. And if you have a set mind prior to the show, expecting something, you might be disappointed. You need to come with an open mind to see something new—a Chicago *Nutcracker* with a different, fresh look.