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Costume Drama

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SPEAKEASY | By Alexandra Cheney

Outfitting 'The Nutcracker'

Twenty six years after she designed the costumes for choreographer Keith Michael's production of "The Nutcracker," Sylvia Nolan still has sugar plum fairies dancing in her head. Although she spends most of her year as the resident costume designer for the Metropolitan Opera, a position she's held since 1997, this year Ms. Nolan is reuniting with Mr. Michael and the New York Theatre Ballet to help create a fresh "Nutcracker," with new costumes, sets and dances.

For Mr. Michael, a friend and frequent collaborator, Ms. Nolan's "passion and expertise" were especially needed for this year's "Nutcracker." "The dry cleaner refused to clean those costumes another time," he quipped. "That was a sign to start on something new."

The production, opening Nov. 19, will be presented as part of the New York Theatre Ballet's Once Upon a Ballet program, a series of hour-long adaptations of full-length ballets tailored for young children. Ms. Nolan, a former dancer, spoke with the Journal recently in the Metropolitan Opera House.

The "Nutcracker" is such a traditional show. How were you able to bring something new to the costumes?

Not every influence of "The Nutcracker" is literally realistic. There's a mix. The choreographer has chosen to set us at the top of a mantelpiece. In my mind there are real people and there are also the figurines and the clock that you might find collected at the top of a mantelpiece. That opens up the costumes because they don't have to be exactly one period. The harlequin and harlequina are inspired by 18th-century mice and figurines, while the parents' clothes are more literally of the time. [Mr. Michael's] previous production was in the mid 19th century and we decided to update it to just past the turn of the 20th century, which allows for some imaginative fairy-tale elements since this is focused toward a youth audience. There's some Art Nouveau. There was a broadening of thinking as to what things could look like.

This production is intended for children ages three to 10. How did that factor into your ideas of costume creation and execution?

I wanted to bring new images to the young audience. They need to be very concentrated and I think the images need to be very pungent and strong and vibrant. I didn't believe in talking down to a young audience. For one thing, they are very sophisticated these days; they know a lot and have tremendous language skills and better computer skills

than I do. So while I wanted the images to be very bright and eye-catching I didn't want the fashions to be childish.

How did you walk that line?

[Gustav] Klimt has these landscape paintings—they are not as known as his portraits but there is an extraordinarily play of color. There's a juxtaposition of many patterns and many colors beautifully orchestrated side by side so it's not garish or gaudy but full of vibrancy and life. I took that visual energy, which is good for a young audience, particu-

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larly as we get toward the end of a piece, when they are tired; the costumes are full of patterns. The mice, for instance, are gray and black with a charreusse polka dot. Rather than just using a gray faux fur, the element of their color can be used to tell us who they are. By the time we get to the end, there's a riot of color.

Mr. Michael tells me there's also a 20-foot-long mouse tail.

I have a disclaimer: It turned out to only be 18 feet long. This was his special request. That is one of the more elaborate and fantastic costumes. The tail is very light;

that was a technical concern because once you get past a few feet it can get very heavy. The children in this production have young bodies that are still growing; you have to be respectful to that process. I'm very careful about weight, about how things fit them so there is no restriction on their movement.

There's a need for costume designers in every city. Why stay in New York?

There's always a new creative impetus in New York. There is a creative ferment, and as a dancer, with all the independent choreographers, you feel that very strongly. Creative work gives you back energy, even though it makes you tired; you want to keep working. New York has that in a very concentrated form. Among the places in the world, it's where the creative spirits are most at work.

How do you use the city in your job?

My best thinking is done with the background of the city as white noise. I don't know whether it's relaxing or all that activity around you helps to focus. But you focus in a very concentrated way on what you need to do. Sometimes, I find it easier to work outside in the crazy city as compared to in a quiet studio.

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The Mouse Queen, with 18-foot tail, is among Sylvia Nolan's costume designs for the New York Theatre Ballet's production of "The Nutcracker."