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It's the same tale every time – a young girl named Marie/Clara celebrates Christmas with her family and friends and receives a Nutcracker doll from a family friend. She falls asleep after the festivities and wakes in the magical and scary land of giant rats and floating angels, where reality is blurred with dreams.

Since *The Nutcracker* was first performed a week before Christmas in 1892, it has become a holiday tradition for families to attend.

Sarah Wroth, professor of music in ballet at Indiana University, said people come to see *The Nutcracker* every year because it reminds them of their childhood. It helps eliminate some of the intimidation of going to the ballet, because people expect to see the same story every year and they understand what they are seeing, unlike with heftier productions.

For 15 years, *The Nutcracker* production at IU remained the same. This year, thanks to a striking man with an Australian accent, it's different. Sasha Janes has renounced tradition and reimagined the beloved classic performance.

It is a risk very few choreographers would dare take. Except for him.

In his adolescence, Sasha learned to dance at the Australian Ballet School in Melbourne. Throughout his career, he has danced professionally with West Australian Ballet, Australian Ballet, Hong Kong Ballet and Dayton Ballet. He has danced all over the world.

During his time in Ohio, he met a ballerina named Rebecca Carmazzi. When she moved to the North Carolina Dance Theater in 2002, Sasha soon followed her, and the two married and built a family, with twin boys and a girl. When he was offered a job at The Jacobs School of Music in 2016, they moved to Bloomington.

Sasha has been called a master of romance due to his memorable partner work choreography through the years, but he rejects this nickname. He recalls a ballet he created where the CIA did mind-control experiments with LSD and a woman stabbed a man in the heart.

“Not everything is about love,” he told The Charlotte Observer in 2018.

This year, Sasha took over choreographing *The Nutcracker* for Michael Vernon, who had choreographed the productions since 2007. Vernon did not retire, and doesn't plan to for a while – he just believed it was time for Bloomington to have a new *Nutcracker*.

“A couple of years ago, I was asked to choreograph a new version of *The Nutcracker*,” said Sasha. “I said no.”

“And then I was asked again, and I contemplated very hard with the weight of such a brilliant production that’s been on stage for many years – and eventually I relented.”

So Sasha ventured to London and attended creative meetings with Thaddeus Strassberger who would become *The Nutcracker*’s set designer, and sat in a studio with him for a week contemplating how to make it happen. He knew that if he were to do this, he had to make it extraordinary.

The process wasn't easy. His dancers had been dancing in the Nutcracker for years - most of them since their childhood years. For some of the children in the production, this may have been their first Nutcracker – and while they may not care that Sasha’s version is different, their parents probably do.

All they could do was cross their fingers and wait for the show.

Rehearsals are strenuous. Every day on the stuffy third floor of the Musical Arts Center, he sports the same black and gray men’s ballet sneakers which allow him to point his feet and spin. He needs to wear these so he can show his dancers what he wants them to do differently.

Ballet is a routine. Dancers know this. In practice, you run the number, you listen to your teacher’s corrections, you run it again. In performances, you do the same thing on stage but without breaks, and at the end, people clap. Sometimes they give flowers.

Sasha wasn’t always a teacher. Until he was almost 50, he maintained his athlete status and conformed to the diet of a ballet dancer. But the body gets tired, and he knew he had so much knowledge to give. It would have been a waste not to share it.

He is a patient teacher, the kind of teacher to tell you he loves what you did before he asks you to do a section again but to change the position of your arms. He’s not the kind of teacher to sit and watch – he is on his feet, moving the male dancers out of the way to show them how to properly lift their female counterparts.

“There you go. Now turn your head, yes! Like that.”

As Sasha dashes from room to room, he only brings his brown shoulder bag and his blue water bottle. He constantly has to ask his dancers what time each rehearsal ends. He is always needed somewhere.

Rehearsal begins promptly. In room 305, practice for the leading roles of Marie and The Nutcracker is taking place.

The dancers take turns performing for Sasha and other adults in the program. The others go through the motion of the dance on the sidelines, and practice the things they were told to work on. There are three pairs of partnerships who will eventually take the stage, and each receives different notes.

When he watches his dancers, Sasha takes notes on a lined notepad using a yellow wooden pencil. When the music ends and the dancers rest their hands on their knees for rest, he rises from his chair and reads his scribbles aloud.

“I think there are too many sauté’s,” said Sasha. “It looks weird. Can we take out the second sauté? Try that section again, without it.”

When he speaks, people listen. People want to listen.

Gray strands have appeared on his once solid jet-black hair. He reaches behind his glasses and rubs his eyes with his fingers before sitting and asking the dancers to start again.

On the ground in front of the piano, facing the dancers, sits a toy Nutcracker – the traditional one you would think of when you hear the name. He wears a sparkly blue coat with red detail and a tall black soldier hat. If you were to lift the raised piece on his back, his toothy mouth would come agape.

He watches his dancers with an unrelenting gaze.

Every room smells of sweat and feet, even before the dancers have entered. These walls have seen generations of ballerinas drill and refine their routines until they are perfect, and sometimes this means dancers may exit the rooms smelling tangy, like an onion or a long distance runner. It is not uncommon for them to leave limping with bloody toes from their pointe shoes.

During rehearsals, ballet is messy and painful. On stage, however, it is sparkly and glamorous. Sasha’s *Nutcracker* is no exception.

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On this night of his show’s grand premiere, he wore a gray colored suit and the same black framed glasses he wore during rehearsals.

When the bright purple curtain rose and the orchestra hummed, all the babies in the room stopped crying.

Here it was, the beginning of the long awaited Sasha Janes' *Nutcracker* world premiere, unveiled before the wide-eyed audience members.

Before them stood a lavish ballroom, reminiscent of the one in *Beauty and the Beast* with lofty ceilings and marble walls. A singular star hung from the ceiling, and beneath it, Marie and her little brother Fritz began a typical sibling quarrel.

That night was special. That night, their family was hosting a formal Christmas party, and their friends and relatives would be arriving soon.

Sasha's set was interactive. Four women, the maids of the house, each took a piece of garland and secured it to the hanging star at center stage. When the star rose, the garlands did too - and together they formed a massive Christmas tree.

48 ballerinas, or guests, begin to trickle into the ballroom at the bourgeois family mansion. They show off their dazzling gowns, well-tailored suits and checkered sweater vests as they enter on stage left through the massive swinging doors.

Sasha said about 800 pieces of costume appear on stage during his *Nutcracker*.

When Drosselmeir arrives, Marie runs to her. This is her godmother, the woman who always bares Marie with magical presents beyond the scope of her imagination.

It is important to know that until now, Drosselmeir had always been portrayed as a man, usually with stringy tufts of gray hair hanging out of his top hat and a mischievous grin on his wrinkled face. The children at the party were afraid of him. Sasha changed the character's gender, and with that, rid the audience of any dark undertones they may have felt while watching the original *Nutcracker*.

Toward the end of the party, Drosselmeir gives Marie a toy Nutcracker – dressed in a sparkly blue coat and tall black soldier hat, sporting the same unrelenting gaze he had in rehearsal. Marie cuddles her new toy until Fritz becomes jealous, and after a high-stakes battle of tug-of-war, the mighty Nutcracker's head is removed from his frail wooden body.

Of course, as the tale goes, Drosselmeir repairs his head and puts him back into the arms of Marie. But, before she exits the party at midnight, she casts a spell and brings *The Nutcracker* to life.

Thus, Marie's journey into the supernatural world begins.

Traditionally, Marie first encounters life-sized rats and enlists the help of life-sized toy soldiers to shoot and kill them. The biggest of them all, the rat king, dies when Marie throws her slipper to distract him. The Nutcracker, now alive and larger than her, then stabs him with his sword.

In Sasha's version, Marie keeps both shoes on her feet, as it would have been difficult for her to remove her ribboned pointe shoe— and they are mice instead of rats. The mouse king dies by falling backward into a comically large mice trap. One final twitch signals his demise when the top of the trap closes on his belly.

The audience roared with laughter from both humor and surprise. Had anyone ever laughed at *The Nutcracker* before?

Sasha made many other changes, both big and small. Fawns appeared in the snow scene, making their grand debut on *The Nutcracker's* stage with high leaps and shy mannerisms. Instead of the traditional angels, there were fireflies – shimmering in the brand new scene of a green lake.

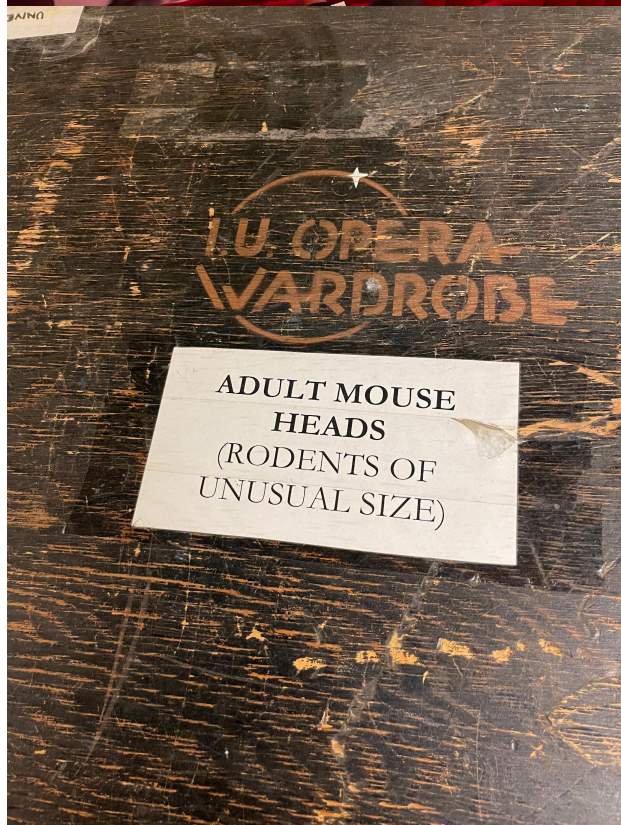
Then, in pranced the dainty white swans in pancake tutus, a savory treat to anyone who loves swans but typically only sees them portrayed during *Swan Lake*. The dancers, whether they were aware of it or not, were making history.

When the orchestra murmured their final note, the audience erupted into applause. Parents, cousins, teachers and students jumped to their feet in unison to give Sasha his first standing ovation for his own *Nutcracker*.

Moments later, he ran on stage wearing the first authentic toothy grin he had shown all night. People whooped and hollered. The dancers relaxed their bodies and clapped for their teacher, who had just performed through them.

Sasha proved ballet tradition didn't have to stay the same.

He was courageous. And it was revolutionary.



I.U. OPERA
WARDROBE

ADULT MOUSE
HEADS
(RODENTS OF
UNUSUAL SIZE)



