



New Nutcracker set to make dance history in Vancouver

*Having two months to rehearse is an 'absolute luxury' as
Choreographer creates a first at home.*

By Kevin Griffin, Vancouver Sun, December 10, 2009

When the snowflakes moved into position on stage, they didn't line up in two neat rows the way they were supposed to. Collectively, they looked more like a blizzard than a group of graceful dancing ballerinas.

To the trained eye of Anna-Marie Holmes, the disorganization was unacceptable. Bundled up in a coat inside a chilly and drafty Centre for the Performing Arts in downtown Vancouver, Holmes watched the disorder unfold from one of the seats in the theatre. Not satisfied with what she was seeing, Holmes put the young dancers through their paces again and again. Chan Hon Goh the former prima ballerina with the National Ballet was one of several people up on the stage floor helping the young dancer orient themselves to one another.

Finally, after eight or nine attempts, they got it right.

"They've all improved so much," Holmes said. "They are like sponges. It is just great."

Holmes knew just how far to push the young dancers. She realized that being in the theatre for the first time meant a big adjustment for the dancers. After a month of training in the Goh Ballet studios on Main, the dancers were on the cavernous stage without any mirrors to look at and relate themselves to the other dancers around them.

"It can be disorienting," Holmes said. "You feel naked on stage."

If Holmes was worried, she wasn't showing it. As a choreographer who has created ballets throughout Europe and North America, she realized that having two months to rehearse *The Nutcracker* was, as she said, "an absolute luxury." With other ballet companies she's worked with, such as the American Ballet Theatre, the number of rehearsal days is more like five. With *The Nutcracker* it will be about 60.

For her young dancers, Holmes mixed criticism with praise. At one of the several points during the afternoon rehearsal, Holmes saw something amiss.

"The leg is dragging," she said, "like a magnet being pulled across the floor."

Holmes directed her comments at a long-legged teenage ballerina rehearsing a pas de deux – a ballet term meaning a dance performed by a couple – from the snow scene near the end of Act 1.

As the couples started performing the duet again, Holmes called out some encouragement: “Breathe. Think pleasant thoughts.”

When they’d performed it to her satisfaction, which meant the ballerina’s body approaching a 90-degree angle to the floor, Holmes said “good” loud enough for the two dancers to hear.

Holmes and the dancers were putting in all the extra hours of preparation for a unique event in the history of dance in Vancouver: the premiere of *The Nutcracker*, a full length production of the classic Russian ballet Dec.17 to 20 at The Centre.



Vladimir Pereira & Danielle Gould as Snow King & Queen; Photo Credit: David Cooper

Conceived by Goh Ballet and under the artistic coordination of ballerina Goh, this new version of *The Nutcracker* is the kind of big-budget production rarely created in Vancouver. Brought to the stage at a cost for \$700,000, *The Nutcracker* will include all new sets and costumes.

It will also include original choreography by Holmes. Raised in Mission and trained as a dancer in Vancouver, Holmes was the first North American to train with the Kirov Ballet in the former Soviet Union in the 1960s. She then went on to a career as a dancer with companies in

Europe and North America. After retiring from the stage, she became an expert in contemporary restagings of the 19th-century classic Russian ballets.

But despite performing and working as a choreographer all around the world, Holmes has never created a ballet for her hometown before. Until now.

“I did it basically because I’m from here,” Holmes said in an interview. “I wanted to do something for the city.”

Holmes said her *Nutcracker* is a re-imagination of familiar elements within the overall structure of the Russian original. She’s also incorporated various athletic activities and performance styles not usually associated with ballet.



Anna Marie-Holmes, Choreographer of Goh Ballet's 2009 Nutcracker

"I've made him the magician, which is as it should be. I've always wanted that. He comes to the party and does magic effects for all the party guests."

Holmes, however, hasn't tampered too much with the traditional interpretations of *Nutcracker*.

Besides taking place on Christmas Eve, the first act includes a big Christmas tree and the battle between the Mouse King and the Nutcracker. In the second, Clara and the Nutcracker visit the Super Plum Fairy and Prince in the Land of the Sweets.

The costumes have a Victorian look and all the music is Tchaikovsky's original. In a rare treat for local dance audiences, the music will be played live.

Each performance will use an estimated 95 dancers, performers and acrobats on stage. Altogether, the Goh Ballet's version will include about 200 young dancers from seven Vancouver area ballet schools. They'll be joined by two dancers from the National Ballet in Toronto.

"I based this *Nutcracker* on a traditional version," Holmes said. "People will see a beautiful ballet that's fun for their family."

Holmes knows from experience how the right kind of *Nutcracker* can be embraced by a city.

When she was artistic director of the Boston Ballet, the company earned \$ 6 million a year from 52 performances during the Christmas season. Revenue from *Nutcracker*

In the Christmas Eve party scene, for example, Holmes has introduced professional ballroom dancers. She has young gymnasts doing flips, rhythmic dancers and an African – Canadian drag queen to play Mother Ginger.

But her big innovation in terms of staging is Dr. Drosselmeyer. He's the man of mystery whose intervention appears to bring the *Nutcracker* alive and make things happen on stage. Holmes always imagined he should be a real magician.

"Other *Nutcrackers* always had someone as Drosselmeyer who didn't do magic very well," Holmes said.

was key to the survival of the Boston Ballet, Holmes said, as it is for many ballet companies throughout North America.

“In Boston, we had people who came to *The Nutcracker* every year for 30 years,” she said. “It was part of their Christmas tradition.”

Holmes and the Goh are hoping for the same kind of long run with this latest addition to the ongoing *Nutcracker*.

The ballet first came to life on stage at the Maryinski Theatre in St. Petersburg in 1892. With partial choreography by Marius Petipa, the creator of many classical Russian Ballets, and a cast with numerous children, *Nutcracker* wasn't a big hit for everyone. One critic said having children on stage with professionals, wrote “in large amounts this is unbearable”.