



ON POINTE

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AS SOUTH BAY BALLET PREPARES FOR ITS ANNUAL PRODUCTION OF *THE NUTCRACKER*, A TIMELESS HOLIDAY TRADITION UNDERGOES A FRESH APPROACH WITH THE HELP OF INCREDIBLE LOCAL TALENT.

On Satori Street in Old Torrance, across from the Red Car Brewery and inside the South Bay Ballet Centre, magical things are happening. In Studio 1, guest choreographer Eva Stone is turning the senior company's seven boys and 12 girls into Stick Figures for her acclaimed modern dance piece, part of the *Bravo!* series this spring.

Upstairs, parent volunteer Akemi Odaka is preparing for the next day's fitting: three Claras, 35 soldiers and 28 mice, along with dew drops, candy canes, snowflakes, gingerbread cookies, Russian dancers, Arabian maidens and countless corps dancers in sumptuous costumes—brocaded, encrusted with jewels or masked and menacing. One-hundred dancers in all make up the astounding 2011 cast of *The Nutcracker*. But, three Claras?

"There were so many things I detested about

the original *Nutcracker*," says artistic director Diane Lauridsen. With her ballet pedigree, pixie cut and backstage-black clothing, Lauridsen is as private and unassuming as her projects are grand: "I kept a list for 20 years about what I wanted to change." Lauridsen is seated at a plastic table in the corner of a lobby filled with photographs of former South Bay Ballet students whose grand jetés have landed them in major ballet companies all over the world. Misty Copeland, to name one, is American Ballet Theater's first African-American female soloist who will perform in ABT's upcoming production of *The Firebird*.

Lauridsen rises to wave a dancer out of Eva Stone's rehearsal. "She has a repeat sprained ankle, is very talented, so it's 'I love you, get out,'" she explains, with a wry smile. "It's all about the kids."

Which makes it virtually impossible to get Lauridsen to talk about herself. The Canoga Park native confirms that she was in the original Broadway performance of *Gigi*, that she trained with Ballet Russe, that she danced with Balanchine and that she loves music. "There are lots of talents I don't have. I can get lost in a closet. But I understand music."

Lauridsen heads upstairs toward Studio 2. Mother Ginger's enormous wood-framed corset rests on the landing. Step by step, Lauridsen recounts the history of ballet in Imperial Russia and the collaboration between Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky and Marius Petipa, which led to the performance of *The Nutcracker* in 1892. Lauridsen has studied all subsequent versions—from Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo's shortened version of the ballet in 1940 to San Francisco



**“I LOVE OUR
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I GOT TO DO IT THE WAY
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– SOUTH BAY BALLET
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR
DIANE LAURIDSEN

Ballet’s first complete performance of *The Nutcracker* in the United States in 1944, followed by Balanchine’s version for New York City Ballet in 1954 and Mikhail Baryshnikov’s performance for American Ballet Theater.

Inside Studio 2, Lauridsen points to the piano she has loved since childhood. “I remember whacking my head when I tried to walk under it,” she says, “I would rather die than not have live accompaniment.” When Lauridsen was studying ballet, her accompanist won the Glinka prize. Given that Tchaikovsky was among the first recipients of the Glinka for *Romeo and Juliet*, the bar for the South Bay Ballet she founded in 1979 has been set vertiginously high (even for accompanists).

“If you’re not strict, the students don’t learn anything,” Lauridsen says. In practice, she is tough, tender and passionate. When the Snow Queen (Delaney Zieg) and the Sugar Plum Fairy (Daisy Jacobson) get it right, or when the Russian dancers execute perfect Cecchetti changes, they hear her shout “hot damn!” After the Grand Pas between the Nutcracker Prince (John-Paul Simoens) and Dream Clara (Yumi Kanazawa), Lauridsen utters, almost piously, “Thank you. That was luscious.”

During Saturday’s all-cast rehearsal and first run-through of the 2011 production of *The Nutcracker*, the 3-year-old mice are confused and a bit noisy, Young Clara (Alison Ramoran) has forgotten her tutu, and a few other dancers are busted for not having their props. Others are “falling into their mothers’ laps,” which is the artistic director’s way of saying that, were there a stage, they’d have fallen off. “It’s the day you hardly believe it’s going to be a show,” Lauridsen smiles.

When the incontestable beauty of Tchaikovsky’s score begins and the party scene starts, all previous versions that bored Lauridsen for their “step, touch, toast” choreography (and a



Clara who sits on a chair for the entire second act) give way to inventive choreography and a level of technical skill astonishing for a pre-professional company. In South Bay Ballet's version of *The Nutcracker*, Clara dreams of becoming a ballerina. Drosselmeyer (played with uncanny maturity by the 15-year-old Benjamin Simoens) gives Clara both a nutcracker and a pair of pointe shoes.

As for the three Claras, Grandmother Clara (Masako Tagasaki) literally opens the storybook and, after Young Clara goes to sleep, Dream Clara starts to dance.

The Russian dancers are all male, Lauridsen points out proudly. "What a ridiculous notion that ballet is just for females!" Her son, Elijah Pressman, who doubles as assistant artistic director and music director, is among them. Keiji Ino is doing enough Cossack jumps to make an observer's knees ache, topped off by a 540, legs scissoring faster than a switch-blade. Another Russian dancer, Richard Link, resembles actor Mark Ruffalo. In a reverse commute that might strike fear in the hearts of Ivy League-seeking parents everywhere, the dancer has deferred his studies at Princeton University in order to pursue his love for ballet.

Thus far, with everything so beautiful at the ballet, Lauridsen admits to the most difficult part of her work, other than the 80-hour weeks: "The hardest part is when a student comes in with a dancer's heart but does not develop the body for ballet." ●

 Catch South Bay Ballet's production of *The Nutcracker* at El Camino College, December 16 at 7 p.m. and December 17 and 18 at 2 p.m. For tickets, visit southbayballet.org.