

Cleveland Ballet's 'The Nutcracker' goes on as planned, despite internal investigation

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The Cleveland Ballet presents the Waltz of the Flowers as part of The Nutcracker. The show will have 11 performances from Dec. 14 to 23 at the Connor Palace Theater. (Photo by Susan Bestul Photography) Susan Bestul Photography

By [Paris Wolfe, cleveland.com](#)

CLEVELAND, Ohio – [Cleveland Ballet's "The Nutcracker"](#) returns to the Connor Palace at Playhouse Square this month despite an ongoing internal investigation into "serious workplace allegations" at the non-profit dance company. Founder and artistic director [Gladisa Guadalupe was suspended](#) in late November. Her husband, co-founder, president and CEO [Michael Krasnyansky was also suspended, then resigned](#) a week later.

The turmoil has certainly roiled the ballet, but the company's director of repertoire Cynthia Graham has stepped in for Guadalupe as artistic director and the director of rehearsals Timour Bourtasenkov is keeping preparations on schedule. Ballet officials say the show will go on as planned.

"The Nutcracker" is scheduled for 11 shows from Dec. 14 to 23.

"The Nutcracker," based on the original story by E.T.A. Hoffman with music composed by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, is a seasonal favorite. Cleveland Ballet performs it every year, often with some variations to keep it interesting to repeat visitors.

In the Cleveland Ballet's version of the show, the two-act ballet is the story of Caroline and the Nutcracker Prince she receives at the opening party. A doll that comes to life, the Nutcracker, accompanies Caroline through a dream sequence where they battle the Mouse King, dance in a glistening snowfall, waltz alongside colorful flowers, and travel by carriage to dance through six countries including Spain, Arabia, China, France, Austria and Ukraine.

France and Austria have been added to the usual lineup of countries, And, like last year, Ukraine replaces Russia as one of the traditional lands. This is, again, a statement against Russia's invasion of Ukraine nearly two years ago. Krasnyansky is originally from the Ukraine.

A second change to tradition is a new character -- the grandmother. She adds a comedic element to the performance, says Rena Vysnionis, the ballet's director of marketing.

"Everyone loves grandma at the party, she brings a lot of spice and flavor to the party scene," says dancer Madison Campbell. "Usually, it's a more elegant party and she brings more life and humor to it as well."

In the absence of Guadalupe's artistic direction, Graham -- former dancer, ballet instructor and director of repertoire for the Cleveland Ballet -- worked with the dancers and staff to make certain the show would go on. Until Graham stepped in to replace Guadalupe, she had been an unpaid volunteer with the organization.

"She stepped in to get 'Nutcracker' ready for stage," says Vysnionis. "She had no intent to be the artistic director. Her job was to focus on the 'Nutcracker.' We have 'Nutcracker' cast. Everything has been finalized. Now it's just running through rehearsals."

Graham has now stepped back and Bourtasenkov, director of rehearsals, has taken over the final weeks of preparations.

"Rehearsals are going great. We're very excited the show will go on," says Bourtasenkov.

Bourtasenkov has extensive credentials. He started his ballet education with the Moldavian Opera House and the Bolshoi Ballet. In the U.S., he has danced with the Pennsylvania Ballet, New Jersey Ballet and helped found the Carolina Ballet. He has choreographed works for Carolina Ballet, Ballet Hawaii, Infinity Ballet and New Jersey Ballet. In addition to his role at Cleveland Ballet, Bourtasenkov is on the faculty of American Ballet Theatre's Summer Intensive.

He is now working with Cleveland Ballet's 33-member company as well as 60 students from School of Cleveland Ballet and six trainees from the School of Cleveland Ballet's trainee program to perfect "The Nutcracker." Because this year's production has 11 performances, up from seven performances in 2022, the show has four casts that will rotate through productions.

That means, for example, the roles of Caroline and the Nutcracker Prince will be danced by four different pairs of dancers. They are Katharine Cowan with Emanuel Tavares, Kaela Ku with Vadim Slatvitskii, Marla Aleyda with Bruno Palheta, and Breanna Justus with Diego Castillo.

The principal roles of Queen and King for the Grand Pas de Deux will be danced, also, by four couples. These include Svetlana Svinko with Narek Martirosyan, Kaela Ku with Johan Mancebo, Marla Aleyda with Bruno Palheta, Nashializ Gomez-Orengo with Lorenzo Pontiggia, and Anna Cole with Emanuel Tavares.

[Cast rotation](#) means return patrons may see different dancers in the same roles from show to show.

"The casting has been extremely intricate with two performances on a given day," says Vysnionis. "It's far more detailed than you would expect."

Campbell, who appears in several roles, finds the role changes refreshing.

“This is a ballet we’ve all been doing since we were 10 years old or younger,” she says of the classic. “Every company has a slightly different story, but the general feeling and magic are the same.

“It’s wonderful for your mind to be able to practice going from one character to the next because you never get bored. It’s new for us every show,” she says. “That leaves the magic in the show for the audience.”

In addition to dancing several roles, Alexander Guzmán designed costumes for Drosselmeyer, Grandmother, the Mouse King, and Arabian dancers.

“This year, I introduced the grandma. made a specific design for her, it’s very 1870 and then it has a little taste of modern,” says Guzman. “I added little details of Drosselmeyer because wanted to put Drosselmeyer and grandma in a specific light. They’re in the same scene and interact.

“The Arabian design is completely brand new. It’s inspired by Moroccan architecture,” he explains.

His designs were then created by the costume shop.

“It’s really special to wear your friend’s design,” says Campbell. “The Cleveland Ballet costume shop is full of wonderful artists who bring his costumes to life.”

For those who facing financial restrictions during the season, The Cleveland Ballet is offering two pay-what-you-can performances. Select tickets are available for performances at 11 a.m., Dec. 14, and 7 p.m., Dec.17.

These discounted tickets start at \$10 with the option to pay more. Those who can’t make the \$10 payment can request special provisions by calling Cleveland Ballet ticketing at 216.320.9000, ext 107 of purchase at [The Nutcracker](#).

Ticket sales are 22 percent higher than last year, says Vysnionis And, matinees are selling out quickly.