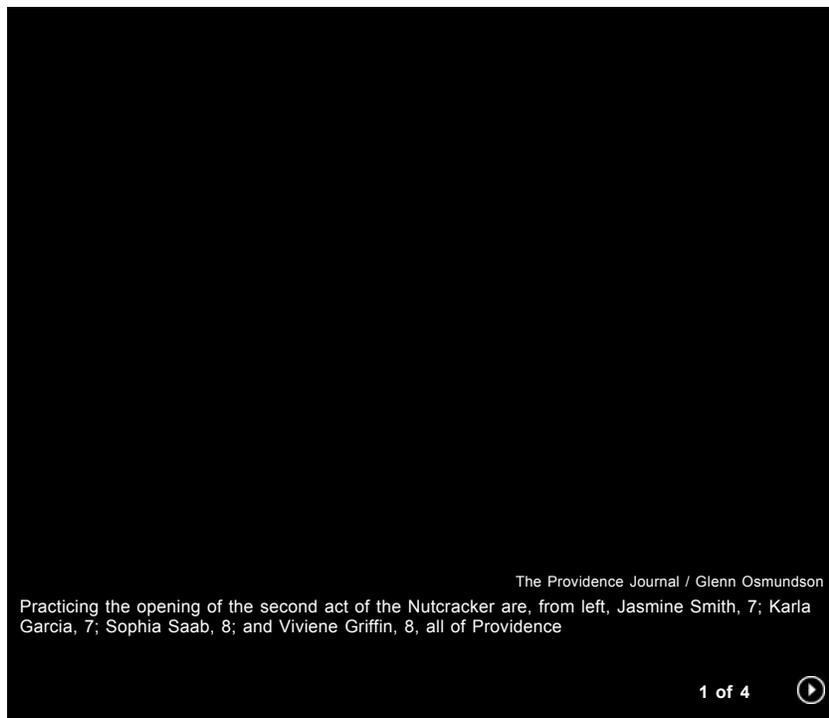


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# Warmups, discipline lead to magical moments for young dancers in Festival's 'Nutcracker'

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Practicing the opening of the second act of the Nutcracker are, from left, Jasmine Smith, 7; Karla Garcia, 7; Sophia Saab, 8; and Vivienne Griffin, 8, all of Providence

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PROVIDENCE, R.I. — When dealing with a wide-ranging cast, what is the biggest challenge in putting together that annual rite of the holiday season, “The Nutcracker” ballet?

To make it all flow seamlessly, said Mihailo “Misha” Djuric, artistic director at Festival Ballet Providence, noting the combination of professional dancers, dance students and children with limited experience. He said the goal was to get where “the entire production has a professional quality.”

Djuric, who has been directing Festival Ballet’s annual production of the holiday staple since 1998, said about 60 dancers are involved in any one show (although the entire cast numbers about 125). They cover “a huge range” in terms of experience, talent and dedication, he said, and include soloists and members of the corps, 9- to 18-year old students who may have many years’ experience, and 7- to 9-year-olds who play the angels. The goal is “to bring it all together,” he said.

The young dancers take their place in the spotlight very seriously.

Lilly O’Flaherty, 13, of North Kingstown, performs in the Russian Dance that features 10 girls and two boys. “I’ve been dancing since I was 3, and this is my third Nutcracker,” she said. “I do a lot of classes here and always come early to warm up.”

Indeed. Mom Elizabeth O’Flaherty said she brings Lilly to class five times a week. “I was not a dancer, she’s self driven,” O’Flaherty said. “I tell her [the cost] is her private school tuition.” But she added that the training instills Lilly with a good work ethic, which helps with her schoolwork.

Vivian Sung, of Providence, agreed. Her 7-year-old daughter, Kelsey Blecker, who has been dancing for four years, plays an angel and “loves it.”

“It teaches her discipline,” said Sung, noting that working on a big project with older children was a good experience. “Agreeing to be in ‘The Nutcracker’ required a commitment. She had to sign a letter of responsibility [and] if she’s tired she still has to come to rehearsal.”

Sophia Smith, 10, of Johnston, dances the role of a party girl in this year's production, her fourth.

"I love it," she said, noting part of the challenge was "trying to look like a kid more than a dancer."

**Djuric said that**, while "mistakes are cute and can happen to everyone, even professionals," his mission in leading the young cast is to have "a production that flows from beginning to end." At the same time, he said a flawless production was not to be expected or possibly even desired.

More important, he said, the production has to be "honest," reflecting the excitement of winter and the holidays with a balance of professionalism and creativity. He added that he was very happy with this year's cast.

About 85 percent of cast are students at the Festival Ballet Providence's ballet school, said director Mary Ann Mayer. She said the school has 250 to 275 students registered at any one time.

She said the audition for "The Nutcracker" took place in September, followed by 10 weeks of rehearsals. "It's a big commitment," she said, adding that "The Nutcracker" is often the first time on stage for most young ballet dancers. "It takes 10 weeks to get them all looking the same."

Mayer said there were not huge requirements for the youngest dancers, "but they do have to have a sense of rhythm, of body awareness and how to hold themselves, to be able to keep in time with the music. They have to learn the music and when to move together." She said the 20 angels on stage were divided between 10 holding candles and 10 holding harps.

The older students have more advanced ballet training. "It requires a lot, they need to look like ballet dancers," she said.

Mayer said leaning to dance ballet was a "slow progression" with "many years of repetition."

"Then there is the artistry and musicality," she said. "Some are naturals and some take time. It's a continuing training process."

**Angelique Pena, 12**, of Johnston, plays a soldier. "It's fun to learn," she said, adding that she has been dancing for 10 years. "The studio is my second home."

David Grannum, 14, of Fall River, said it was important to "get into your character," which involves "training and learning the part." Grannum is a mouse and an understudy for the Russian Dance scene. He said he marveled at the progress he has made. "So much done, so many times," he said.

Audrey McCarthy, 14, of Barrington, said she had been dancing for 11 years and this was her seventh Nutcracker. She said she enjoyed her role as a Russian dancer. "A lot of energy," she said. "Very fiery and sharp. I like that."

AJ Maio, 14, of Barrington, who plays Clara's brother Fritz, has been dancing in the ballet for the past nine years; this year is his third as Fritz.

Dylan Childs, marketing director and company dancer, said "It's one weekend and we put everything into it. He added that the audience "drives a lot of what happens on stage." He said a good, receptive audience adds energy to the production. "It's important," he said. "Audiences don't realize what they can bring to the dancers."

**The four performances of "The Nutcracker" are Friday, Dec. 19, at 8 p.m.; Saturday, Dec. 20, at 2 p.m. and at 7 p.m.; and Sunday, Dec. 21, at 1:30 p.m., at the Providence Performing Arts Center. Prices range from \$23 to \$85.**

*For tickets, go to [ppacri.org](http://ppacri.org) or call (401) 421-2787. For more information, go to: [festivalballet.com](http://festivalballet.com).*

*For a special treat prior to the matinee performance on Saturday, mingle with costumed members of the cast at 11:30 a.m. at Clara's Tea at Gracie's, 194 Washington St., Providence. "Revel in the beautiful holiday décor, enjoy delectable treats and a selection of teas from around the world, and meet Clara and other Nutcracker characters," reads the dance company's description. Tickets are \$15 for children 5 and younger, \$25 for children 6-11 and \$40 for adults.*





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