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Cleveland: Hardening the Nutcracker

By Terry Teachout/Cleveland

If it's December, this must be The Nutcracker. With Christmas just days away, hardly a dancer in America isn't appearing in a production of the best loved of all classic ballets. But the Nutcracker being presented through this weekend by the Cleveland School of the Arts, a public magnet school whose 658 students come from some of the city's poorest neighborhoods, bears little resemblance to the traditional versions that fill most theaters at this time of year. Tchaikovsky's romantic score has been replaced by the blunt, insistent boom of a drummer pounding out rhythms on a plastic bucket. Marie, the little girl who dreams of journeying to unknown lands, has become Miesha, the knowing offspring of a single-mom family, while her godfather Drosselmeyer, though still endowed with magical powers, also plays trumpet like Miles Davis and does a mean MC Hammer imitation.

This is An Urban Nutcracker, the latest and most ambitious product of a five-year collaboration between Alison Chase, a founding member of the innovative Pilobolus Dance Theatre, and Bill Wade, director of YARD (Youth at Risk Dancing), a company of teenagers drawn from the student body of the Cleveland School of the Arts. It's hardly the first time The Nutcracker has been updated: Mark Morris' raucous The Hard Nut is set in postmodern suburbia, while Donald Byrd's Harlem Nutcracker uses Duke Ellington's swinging adaptation of Tchaikovsky's score. But An Urban Nutcracker has a special ring of authenticity: the libretto has been completely rewritten to reflect the everyday lives of the students, and the choreography, based on long sessions of group improvisation by the 40-member cast, is an irresistibly lively fusion of Pilobolus-style modern-dance steps and hard-edged moves that come straight from the street.

At a recent rehearsal, Chase and Wade were working out a scene from the second act. One boy sat in the corner of the studio, crisply dribbling a basketball; three others started slamming balls on the floor to a hip-hop beat. All at once the air was full of dancers, and what looked at first glance like boiling chaos quickly resolved into a joyous explosion of movement and sound. This is one of the "foreign lands" to which Miesha travels: a pro-basketball game. "You have to remember," Chase points out, "that for most of these kids, actually going to a real pro game would be as much of a journey as going to China or Paris."

An Urban Nutcracker is a perfectly serious work of choreographic art--Chase sees to that--but like much of what happens at the Cleveland School of the Arts, it is also an exercise in human reclamation, carried out on the tightest of budgets. Though the plaster is crumbling and the radiators are as old as fossils, these classrooms crackle with an exuberance no amount of poverty can discourage. Two-thirds of the students

here come from families on public assistance, yet three-quarters of the students go on to some form of higher education. "Some will become dancers," Chase says. "Others will take the training and discipline and do something else with it." Cleotha McJunkins III, 17, the lithe, stage-savvy prince of *An Urban Nutcracker*, longs to join Pilobolus and eventually start his own company. "I know I want to dance," he says.

Yet for all the uncanny professionalism of the kids in this room, their lives are not those of ordinary dancers. As the school bell rings and the rehearsal breaks up, Wade drops his drill-sergeant manner and puts a comforting arm around a thin, anxious-looking boy whose mind is clearly elsewhere. "What's wrong?" he asks. "Trouble at home?"

The boy nods. "I heard something I didn't want to hear," he says, looking at the floor. "I slept in the bathtub."

Later, Wade explains that on especially violent nights, many ghetto mothers put their children to bed in the tub to shield them from stray bullets. "The first three months I worked here," he says matter-of-factly, a shadow of sadness flickering across his open face, "I cried myself to sleep every night. But you get used to it. You encourage the redeemable attributes. That's what we're doing. We're teaching the kids about commitment--teaching them how to be young adults--through the discipline of dance." Then he straightens his shoulders and marches off to the next rehearsal.

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