

DANCE

Welcome to his world

James Canfield seizes ballet chestnut and cracks it wide open

BY ORIANA GREEN

If you were ever taken as a child to *The Nutcracker* by a culturally minded relative, you will find special delight in *The Nut Has Finally Cracked*, a total re-envisioning of the classic holiday ballet. And who better to turn this sugary confection upside down and inject it with some sass than Portland's own bad boy of ballet, James Canfield?

As founding artistic director of the Oregon Ballet Theatre, he has long delighted open-minded audiences with his irreverent approach to dance. And he looks the part. With his baseball cap on backward, sitting on the floor of the new rehearsal studio while putting dancers through the paces, his bare right arm encircled in an epic poem of tattoos, Canfield exudes playful command of his company.

One young woman, who is undoubtedly a vision of grace in her toe shoes, looks mildly alarmed to be doing her part on old-fashioned roller skates. "That could be funny, just constantly out of control," Canfield tells her. No problem—if she is feigning lack of skating prowess, she's a superb actress.

Apparently improvising, Canfield suddenly leaps up, grabs her arm and whips her around the floor in a wide arc. When he releases her, she careens toward the barre, where she is caught by another dancer. This is clearly not traditional choreography.

Canfield's young company is notable for its lack of a particular look, which is not to say that his ballerinas are zaftig or anything that radical but that his 18 dancers do not come from the same cookie cutter. This day, they are clearly having fun co-creating this sendup of a ballet they've all danced too many times to count.

As their director consults a legal pad of notes that he transforms into movement, it's refreshing to watch the dancers offer suggestions and try them out instantly. "Now I want this to be the real one," Canfield mutters as he winds up the rehearsal.

As he tells me later over a hasty lunch at the Thai joint across the street, every year as the last performance of *The Nutcracker* approaches, the dancers beg him to allow them to have some fun and spoof it. Still, he's wary of alienating faithful audience members who've come to see the real deal in all its candy-coated sweetness.

But for two nights only, Dec. 12 and 13, the company will finally get its wish in an original production subtitled *Peter's Dream and Marie's Nightmare*. His dancers "are equal partners in creating it," Canfield explains, adding that fans will recognize inside jokes and references to other ballets he has choreographed, including his controversial rock ballets.

Indeed, at rehearsal one fellow practices his entrance carrying a ghetto blaster. The scene is organized chaos as Canfield instructs a row of men to fall like dominoes when lightly shoved.

What already looks difficult enough will get even more so. "Men, you're each going to have one of those big rat costumes wrapped around you," he reminds them.

"We're definitely going to use different music as well, but *The Nutcracker* will be there the whole time, fading in and out," he reveals.

In addition, expect the unexpected: Some secret Portland celebs will pop up in cameos—although not, thankfully, as dancers. Canfield explains that he's out to entertain, not to embarrass anyone.

Considering some of the high-profile community leaders on his board and in his corner, they should add a nice dash of spice to the proceedings.

Canfield is buzzed about his company's new home in a remodeled bank building, which finally gives the dancers the professional training facilities they deserve. "That city block is for dance as long as the city wants it," he says.

"I think OBT is going to be a pied piper to the east side as far as cultural institutions go."



The rat is king in this version

"What I'm most proud of is that we train our dancers here," he beams, referring to the ballet school on the premises that instills in 200 children a love of the dance. "There are a lot of really talented kids here." (A good 65 percent of his adult company came up through the ranks of this school.)

As a former principal dancer during the 1980s with New York's prestigious Joffrey Ballet, Canfield is still in love with dance. "It's sexy being in the dark together as an audience. That's what I love about live theater—anything can happen," he enthuses. "Nothing in my life will ever replace how fantastic it is."

So if this spoof sounds like fun but you've never seen *The Nutcracker*, fear not—Canfield assures me you won't need to be familiar with the original to enjoy the 21st century version. If you feel the need to know what little plot there is, it can be gleaned in two minutes at www.nutcrackerballet.net. [T]

THE NUT HAS FINALLY CRACKED plays Dec. 12 and 13 at Keller Auditorium, 222 S.W. Clay St. Tickets are \$5.50-\$87 from 503-222-5538 or Ticketmaster.

ORIANA GREEN took one year of ballet class as a child until it was clear she would never bend that way. She is also the Entertainment Editor of Just Out and can be reached at oriana@justout.com.

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