

HOW TO Reboot a Holiday Classic

The tutus are gone, a young girl's riches are now rags, and a Tony-winning choreographer has a bold new vision: Welcome to Joffrey's reimagined *Nutcracker*, nearly 10 years in the making.

BY NISSA RHEE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CLAYTON HAUCK

When Ashley Wheeler took over as artistic director at the Joffrey Ballet in 2007, he was shocked to discover the state of sets for the company's long-running production of *The Nutcracker*. "The scenery was completely falling apart," he says. "The drops for the snow scene and the second act were threadbare, the paint was falling off, and the wood was kind of rotten."

Over lunch not long afterward, Wheeler aired his woes to his longtime friend Christopher Wheeldon, a Tony Award-winning choreographer. Wheeldon was interested in directing *The Nutcracker*, so the two started brainstorming. Nearly a decade later, on December 10, the Joffrey will premiere Wheeldon's reimagining of the holiday classic in what promises to be one of the most exciting productions of the year.


Wheeldon, who won his 2015 Tony for *An American in Paris*, brought together some of the biggest names in theater, including writer Brian Selznick (*The Invention of Hugo Cabret*), designer Julian Crouch (*Hedwig and the Angry Inch*), and puppeteer and MacArthur "genius" Basil Twist, to transport the setting from a traditional plush Victorian home to an immigrant worker's shack on the eve of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. There, the story follows a Polish girl named Marie whose mother makes the sculptures that sit on top of the fair buildings. "It had always bothered me a little bit that *The Nutcracker* is about privileged children that fall asleep and get more goodies," says Wheeldon.

For Wheeler, Wheeldon's vision does much more than just offer a new setting: "As someone who has danced *The Nutcracker* since I was a young boy, Chris has shown me a side that I hadn't really thought about."



Renderings
of Marie's
costumes

RENDERINGS: COURTESY OF JOFFREY BALLET



Amanda Assucena
(front) in rehearsal
on October 19

The Maries

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In his take on *The Nutcracker*, writer Brian Selznick says, he wanted to “make Marie’s journey more emotional” than that of the classic heroine, Clara. “Marie has the ability to look at the world

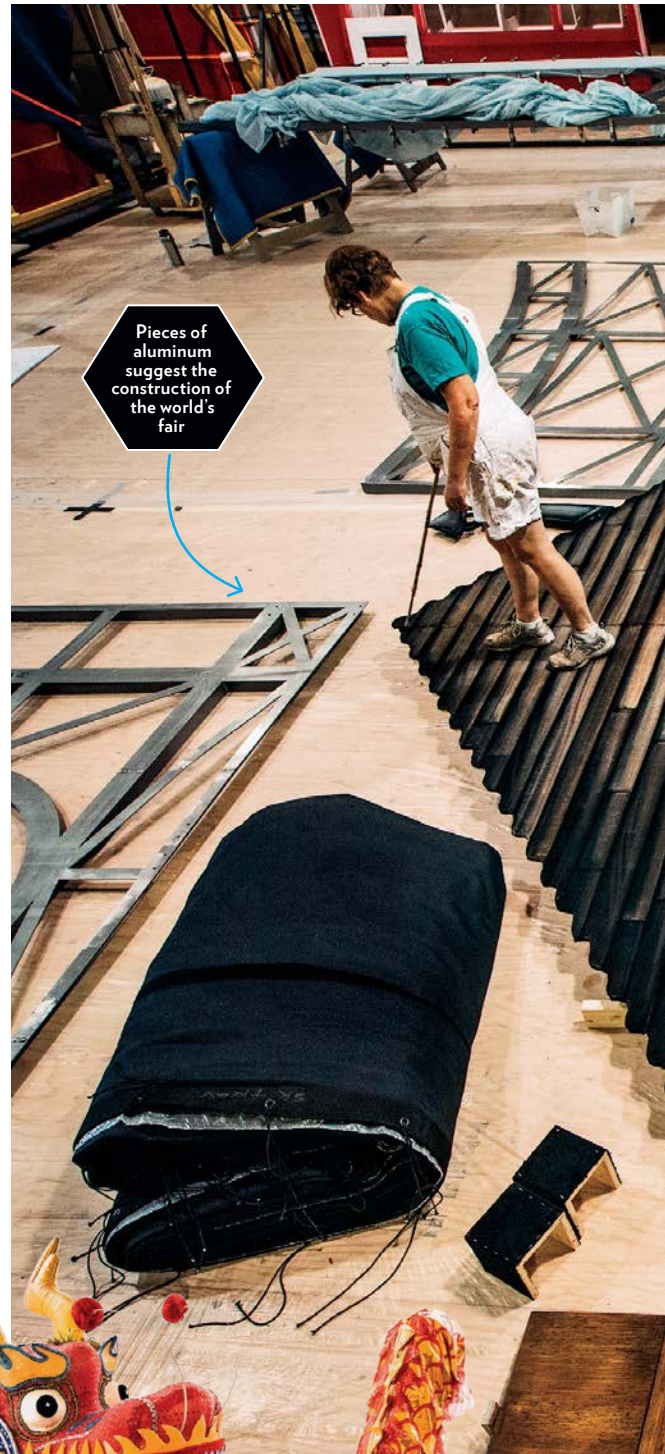
around her and see magic in it,” says Selznick, who penned a 12-page outline after conferring with choreographer Christopher Wheeldon in 2015. ◆ When casting Marie, the artistic team had to consider the complexity of the part. “The role is challenging because you have to accomplish all of the techniques and also take the audience on a journey,” says Wheater.

◆ Preliminary casting started last spring, and seven women were chosen to perform the role of Marie on a rotating basis. Wheeldon worked with one of them, Joffrey rising star Amanda Assucena, to create the part’s choreography. “Amanda is really able to convey a story,” says artistic director Ashley Wheater. “Her movement is expressive, gentle, and subtle.”

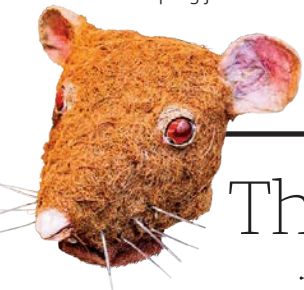


The Choreography

Christopher Wheeldon (above left) created the choreography for his *Nutcracker* “on the dancers” during the first rehearsals in August. “I like to have the dancers present to develop the material,” says Wheeldon, who spent 12 weeks with the cast. “It’s so much more fun for them when they feel that it’s really being made for them, rather than me developing just a bunch of steps that I ask them to execute.”



Pieces of aluminum suggest the construction of the world's fair



The Puppets

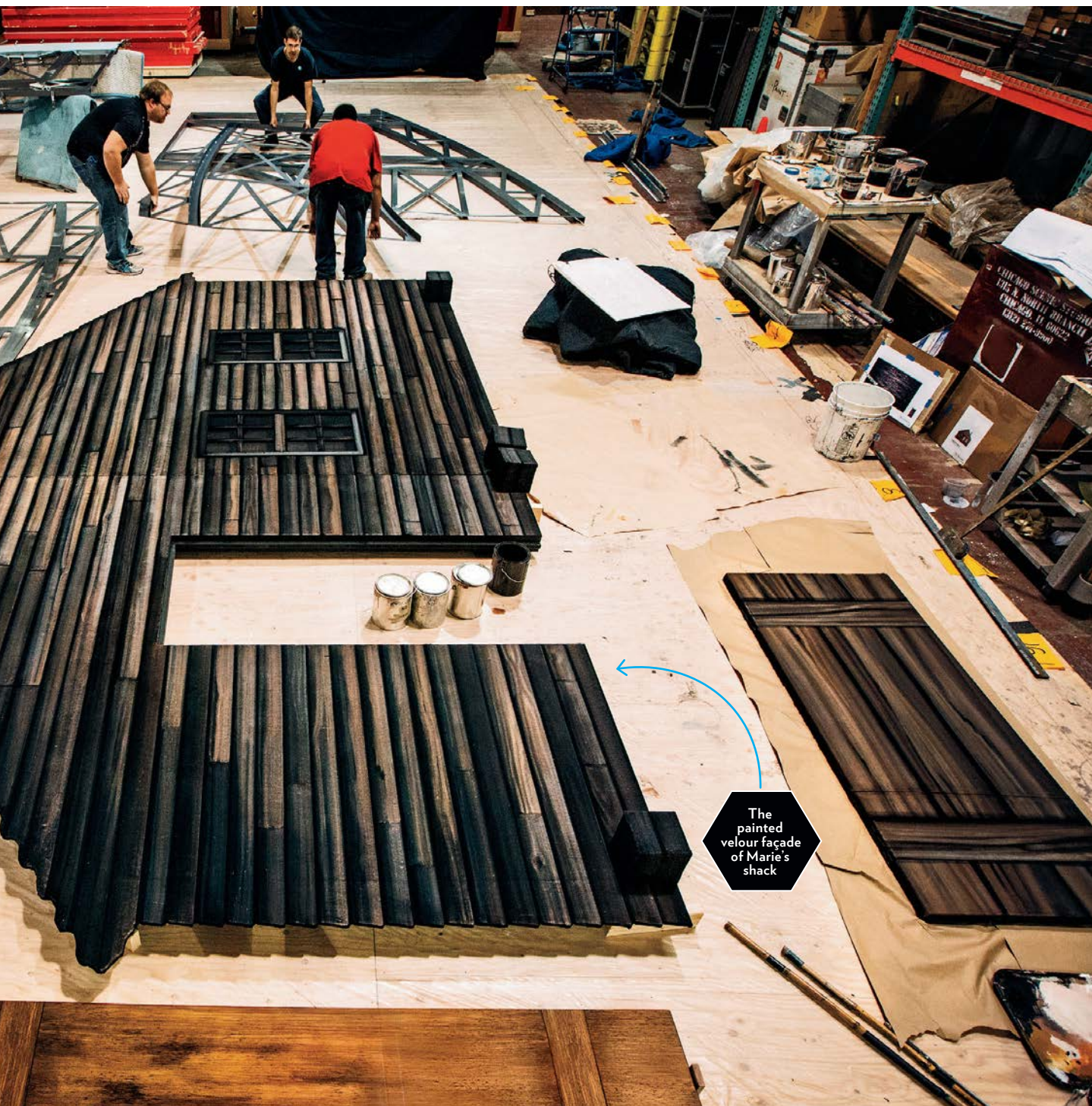
Mouse Heads

Basil Twist, of *Pee-wee's Playhouse* fame, retooled the traditional white-and-gray mouse army for this production. The mice's fur is made of coir, the natural fiber on the husks of coconuts, and their whiskers are painted zip ties.

Chinese Dragon

In act 2, several dancers clad in black manipulate a 63-foot-long cloth dragon at the Chinese pavilion at the world's fair.





The Sets

Stefan Koniarz, a project manager at Chicago Scenic Studios, has built sets for three *Nutcracker* productions, but none quite like this. “If somebody were to put these plans in front of me and say, ‘It is a *Nutcracker*,’ I wouldn’t have believed

them,” says Koniarz. ♦ Aside from the traditional growing Christmas tree, almost the entire look is new, he says. For one, it has a “full Broadway set,” designed by Julian Crouch, that is about six times the size of that of a typical theater

production. ♦ Crouch studied archival photos of the 1893 world’s fair and incorporated many architectural elements of the White City into his design. ♦ Though the shack where Marie and her family live looks like it is made of wood,

Koniarz’s team actually used hand-painted velour. “It catches the light better,” explains Koniarz. An artist layered colors onto the fabric one by one with a three-foot-long bamboo-handled brush to create the illusion of wood grain.

The Costumes

When people think of *The Nutcracker*, they usually imagine “an onslaught of tutus,” says Ellie Cotey, Joffrey’s head of wardrobe. That’s not the case with this production. “The clothes we built feel like real clothes and not dance costumes.” ♦ Designers created over a thousand individual pieces, sourcing material everywhere from B&J Fabrics in New York to brocade makers in China. “It was a hunt,” says Cotey. ♦ To accommodate the unusually large rotating cast of 33 company dancers and more than 35 children, Cotey and her team of wardrobe artists made twice as many costumes as will be onstage each night. Cotey bought plenty of backup fabric for last-minute repairs—in total, a hundred yards of spandex and hundreds of yards of netting. ♦ Some of the more intricate pieces to construct were the Arabian costumes from act 2. Julian Crouch wanted the woman’s dress to look handmade, so the bodice was stitched with three types of braided silk. The silk skirt can easily tear, so Cotey bought 30 yards of the unique paisley print. “I don’t think we can find it again if we need to.”



Partially finished product

Costume sketch

RENDERINGS: COURTESY OF JOFFREY BALLET



Costume sketch

Partially finished product

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GO Christopher Wheeldon's *Nutcracker* runs December 10 to 30 at the Auditorium Theatre, 50 E. Congress Pkwy. \$35 to \$165. joffrey.org/nutcracker



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1 Dancer Victoria Jaiani testing the durability of her costume 2 Dancer Fabrice Calmels getting fitted for his costume 3 Fabric samples on the costume shop wall 4 A seamstress adjusting the costume for a snow fairy, one of a group of whimsical women that Marie encounters in act 2 5 A snow fairy's crown 6 One of the costumes from the Venetian pavilion 7 A seamstress working on a Spanish pavilion costume