



The Tallahassee Ballet performs a dress rehearsal for *The Nutcracker* in Ruby Diamond Concert Hall Friday, Dec. 7, 2018. TORI SCHNEIDER/TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

Passion to perform

Live 'Nutcracker' energizes Tallahassee Ballet's Tyrone Brooks, dancers

Tyrone Brooks, Tallahassee Ballet's artistic director, is preparing for "The Nutcracker," which will feature a live orchestra this year. Performances will take place on Dec. 18 and 19. TALLAHASSEE BALLET

Amanda Sieradzki Council on Culture & Arts

Artistic Director Tyrone Brooks is celebrating his ninth season with the Tallahassee Ballet this year. This milestone comes on the heels of another — Brooks turned 60 this past summer. • "The journey never stops," remarks Brooks. "You're constantly learning because your environment changes, your world changes, and the community at large and the culture changes."

Looking back on his distinguished ballet career, which began at the Dance Theatre of Harlem as a principal dancer, to his role now as an educator and artistic director, he is optimistic for what the future holds for the Tallahassee Ballet.

"We don't realize the impact one evening has and what goes into making that happen," reflects Brooks, who says the company is jubilant to be taking the stage at the Ruby Diamond Concert Hall

after a year and a half hiatus. "We've all learned from this pandemic. We don't take things for granted. Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, there is a need and desire for the Tallahassee Ballet to exist."

The Tallahassee Ballet's "The Nutcracker" will feature a live orchestra this year, bringing together music and dance for the holiday season. Performances will take place on Dec. 18 and 19, with a special children's performance on Satur-

day at 10:30 a.m.

Brooks notes that the choreography by Kathryn Karrh Cashin, performance director and resident choreographer for the ballet for over 30 years, continues to be breathtaking in its execution.

His favorite part of the ballet remains the snow scene towards the end of the first act — he is awestruck by everything from the costumes to the gentle snowflakes that fall on the dancers at the act's conclusion.

Ready for orchestra, action

"It's been a whole year since we've done the Nutcracker and people are anxious to get out and see it," says Brooks. "To hear an orchestra and to feel that energy. It's the energy of the Tallahassee Ballet and what we bring to the community. Our goal is to always present quality."

The Nutcracker ballet is a staple in most company repertoires, especially in the month of December. Brooks guest starred in several Nutcracker performances over the years, including taking on roles as the Cavalier that dances with the Sugar Plum Fairy, as well as the Spanish variation from the second act.

For Brooks, ballet at its core is architecture. His goal as artistic director has been to elevate and introduce new architects into the company's repertoire — expanding beyond classical ballet and introducing choreographers who work within neoclassical and contemporary vocabularies.

Highlights have included hosting guest artist Christopher Huggins, a former member of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, who created original works for and on the company.

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Brooks

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Expanding diversity, looking ahead

“My focus was bringing the institution into the 21st century in terms of what the dance world is looking for,” says Brooks. “If we’re going to prepare artists to go out into the world and compete, that meant changing the repertoire so that it became more diverse. I want something that’s going to be created on the dancers and that’s going to challenge them.”

While always looking to expand his dancers’ horizons, Brooks is a champion of “going back to basics” when it comes to improving dance technique and becoming an artistically expressive performer. He credits his mentor and former founder and director of the Dance Theatre of Harlem, Arthur Mitchell, with instilling this philosophy.

When preparing lesson plans, Brooks

looks at what will be performed onstage and works backwards from there. Instead of focusing on tricks, he prefers to focus classes on the basic steps needed to achieve specific choreography and accomplish it at a high level of execution.

‘There for a purpose’

“Dancers think you need high legs and pretty feet in order to perform,” says Brooks. “No, you do not. It’s the passion and what you’re bringing to the table. It’s my responsibility as the artistic director to nurture and bring out those certain qualities that I see. Each dancer at the Tallahassee Ballet is there for a purpose because there is something that I saw that made them different.”

Brooks cares deeply for his students and company members. Before beginning class or going onstage, he gathers dancers into a circle to set a clear intention for the day.

Brooks says his responsibility as director is to concentrate on three main pillars for students’ growth and develop-

If you go

What: The Tallahassee Ballet’s The Nutcracker LIVE

When: 10:30 a.m. (children’s performance) 7:30 p.m., Saturday, Dec. 18 and 2:30 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 19

Where: Ruby Diamond Concert Hall, 222 Copeland St.

Cost: Ticket prices vary

Contact: For more information, call 850-224-6917 or visit tallahasseeballet.org.

ment: education, artistic excellence and social awareness.

Many times this means discussing and contemplating current events as a means of setting an intention for a class or performance. In the wake of the recent Michigan school shooting, Brooks had his classes take a moment of silence and send positive thoughts out into the world. In the first exercise at the ballet

barre, he encouraged all to “plié for peace.”

Brooks recalls the lyrics of a gospel song his mother used to sing to him—“may the work I’ve done speak for me.”

This sentiment continues to serve as the basis for every step he’s taken with the company. He’s witnessed many students grow up, start families, branch out into new careers, and is proud of them all for what they’ve achieved.

“Getting back into the studio has been so therapeutic for me and the dancers,” says Brooks. “They’ve gone through a lot and I make an effort to mentally stimulate them in a positive way. These are young minds and if they’re not healthy mentally, they won’t be healthy physically. It’s very important to have a balance in the studio. Yes, let’s get the work done, but it’s OK to laugh and be real people, too.”

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area’s umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).