

REIMAGINING TRADITION

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Gen Horiuchi works with dancers in the studio. (Photo: Colin Ellis)

Whether it's a favorite holiday recipe, sledding on Art Hill or just spending time with family, there are certain things that make winter such a special season. For thousands of St. Louisans, it wouldn't be the holidays without Saint Louis Ballet's annual production of *The Nutcracker*. This winter, the pandemic has made in-person performances impossible, but that won't stop the ballet from bringing the beloved tradition to the community.

Like other industries, Saint Louis Ballet has had to find new ways to safely allow its performers to work. Executive and creative director Gen Horiuchi notes that it's important for dancers to be able to practice their art. "Professional ballet dancers need to continue performing and training, or they fall out of practice and shape," he says. "Whether it's in front of a live audience or a camera, it's important that we have opportunities to continue to perform."

Before the pandemic, the entire company would come together for morning training. Now, the class is held virtually. Dancers are socially distanced across four studio spaces equipped with monitors, and a video call connects everyone. Masks also are mandated at all times. For rehearsals, the dancers split into groups of no more than four. The current circumstances have had some unexpected silver linings, since

Horiuchi gets to work with performers individually. "Working one-on-one, I build a stronger rapport and establish trust," he says. "We can work on technique, expression and details. There's been a really wonderful energy in the studio."

In October, the ballet opened its 2020-2021 season with a virtual performance called *This Is Who We Are*. Horiuchi says special precautions were taken to ensure the dancers' safety. "The program consisted of solos and duets of couples who felt comfortable performing together," he explains. "Everyone was tested for COVID-19 and mutually agreed to follow personal guidelines to avoid infection." The livestreamed performance was watched by more than 3,000 people and included interviews with the dancers to offer insight into their experience of the pandemic.

Having completed one virtual performance, Saint Louis Ballet is applying what it has learned to *Nutcracker Extravaganza*. The 2020 program will begin streaming Dec. 12 and includes interviews with dancers and a behind-the-scenes look at this year's rehearsals. Horiuchi explains that due to the nature of Tchaikovsky's ballet, the performance will feature a combination of new set pieces and scenes from previous years. "The first act includes 80 to 90 ballet students, and we cannot have that many children on stage and safely social distance," he says. "For the new scenes in the second act, we only are using 20 dancers."

The performance is free to stream, and audiences can add to the magic with special packages. The Sugar Plum Fairy Meal, offered Dec. 19 and 20, includes a specially designed menu from Butler's Pantry delivered to guests at home. A costumed dancer also will deliver a special nutcracker and sign autographs. "More than 12,000 people come to *The Nutcracker* every holiday season," Horiuchi says. "It may be easy to say we'll skip it this year, but we want to offer something that provides the feeling of that tradition."

This year also marks Horiuchi's 20th anniversary with Saint Louis Ballet. Despite the difficulties presented, he's looking forward to continuing to grow the organization and the cultural potential of the city. "My first performance was *The Nutcracker* in 2000, and I remember looking at the audience and recognizing every person as relatives of the dancers or ballet employees," he says. "Twenty years later, I'm so happy to see people who have never come to a performance before enjoying ballet. I'm happy to have done something for the city, especially not being from St. Louis. I feel like I've become a member of the community."