

STAGE & ARTS

'Nutcracker' Mouse/Rat Queens from 3 different productions reflect on the role

Dancers offer different takes on the same character in three Twin Cities "Nutcracker" productions.
By **SHEILA REGAN** Star Tribune

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ELIZABETH FLORES - STAR TRIBUNE

Dancers Emily Kleinschmidt, left, Solana Temple, center, and Michelle Ludwig will play the Mouse/Rat Queens for three local "Nutcracker" productions.

Michelle Ludwig - Ballet Co.Laboratory's "Nutcracker in Wonderland"

In Ballet Co.Laboratory's version of the Nutcracker, there is no Nutcracker.

"It's only the rats, and they represent all of Clara's fears," Rat Queen Michelle Ludwig said. "I'm her inner demon."

In this version, there's a Rat Queen and a Rat King, played by TU Dance member Christian Warner, with whom Ludwig does some acrobatic partnering. The Rats represent all the things that are keeping Clara from living her life and taking chances. When she escapes them, "it's a big deal," Ludwig said. "It's her transformation." In the show, Clara goes through a door to Wonderland, where she meets characters from Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland" — a mashup of 19th-century children's stories. The idea for the concept, Ludwig said, was to differentiate Ballet Co.Laboratory as a company, in addition to avoiding cultural stereotypes in the second act. Ludwig loves returning to the Nutcracker each season.

“It is different every year, even though it’s the same story line,” she said. “You find new things to play with.”

Dec. 13-15, Huss Center, St. Paul Academy, \$22-\$25, balletcolaboratory.org

Solana Temple - “Loyce Houlton’s Nutcracker Fantasy”

Growing up in Tucson, Ariz., Solana Temple performed with a company from the age of 11 that had tumbleweeds and Cavalier soldiers instead of snow and Redcoats. Over the years in different productions, she has played Clara, the Flower Queen, the Spanish Dancer, the Sugar Plum Fairy and ensemble characters. When she was in college at the Juilliard School, Temple didn’t do the Nutcracker for a couple of years.

“It was funny because it didn’t feel like Christmas,” she said.

Playing the Rat Queen, Solana said she likes being physical.

“I have a lot of power,” she said. “This has a ton of jumping and you’re making a stand. You’re trying to defend your territory — it’s just really fun.”

Temple’s weapon is a giant sewing needle she uses as a sword, and fencing is a big part of her performance.

“By the first rehearsal, it’s already in your body,” she said. “And then you get a chance to work on new character development and finding new finesse with the Nutcracker, and how you can pull out the emotion because you’re less worried about the steps.”

Dec. 13-23, State Theatre, \$30-\$75, hennepintheatretrust.org

Emily Kleinschmidt - Twin Cities Ballet’s “A Minnesota Nutcracker”

This is Emily Kleinschmidt’s first season with Twin Cities Ballet. She completed her BFA in ballet at the University of Utah this past spring. She enjoys the variety of the Nutcracker.

“Every company does it a little bit differently,” she said.

Twin Cities Ballet has a Minnesota theme to its production, with a set that places the story in Twin Cities locations like Summit Avenue, the Mississippi River and Rice Park. She wears a giant mask as the Mouse Queen, dance-fighting with the Nutcracker character.

“It’s a little disorienting,” she said of the costume. “You don’t have any peripheral vision.”

For the first time Kleinschmidt is playing one of the characters in the story. In previous productions, she was part of the corps de ballet, dancing as snow in the “Waltz of the Snowflakes.” She performed in her first Nutcracker at 14 with Minnesota Dance Theatre and danced in Ballet Minnesota’s Nutcracker her senior year in high school. While she enjoys the camaraderie of corps work, she’s loving working closely with the director and her dance partner doing a soloist role.

Also, “It’s sort of fun to be evil,” she said.

Dec. 13-15, Ames Center, \$24-\$38, ames-center.com