

# NOUVELLES DU BALLET

Newsletter of Champaign Urbana Ballet

Fall 2019



Party Dad Promenade  
Your Invitation Awaits!





# Creative Camaraderie



Pictured above: Feddersen with his daughter Taylor as Clara, a highlight of his Nutcracker career.

In 2003, Brett Feddersen received an unexpected party invitation from Champaign Urbana Ballet then producer Tracy McCabe to join *The Nutcracker* cast as a “Party Dad” and dance at the Stahlbaum home. Brett’s 5-year old daughter Taylor, a first-time Polichinelle at the time, encouraged him, “Come on Dad; it’ll be fun!” Tony Hynes, fellow Party Dad, said his son Alex was instrumental in his decision to audition after being invited in 2011. The sentiment of “fun” for the Party Dads is accompanied by the challenge of dancing and guiding new dads through the Stahlbaum Party scene each year. The Dads create a subtle story of on-stage interactions for new and returning audiences each December.

Despite nerves and pending experience on the big stage, Brett accepted the invitation from Tracy and became one of CUB’s tried and true Party Dads, leading him to other roles for company productions, such as Drosselmeyer and Dr. Coppelius (one of his all-time favorite characters). Brett likes the creativity of being in character and being in the moment on the stage. Being in the moment is an enduring theme for him and many Dads. From rehearsal to stage, they learn choreography alongside experienced dancers, and develop a back-story for each of their fatherly characters. When you watch the party scene, look for the Dads miming to elevate the visual art of the scene. You might see one disagree with another, a group discussing a hunting story, a





father griping about their child, or a Dad admire or admonish someone or something at the party. Tony said he wears prescription glasses from the era and tends toward the story of a “gentleman who has traveled or with some military background, who lets his wife keep the kids in check while he drinks a fair amount of wine.” Tony notes the wine is not real nor of good quality! These creative back-stories and subtle “conversations” amongst the Party Dads add movement and authenticity to the scene.

The camaraderie of the Party Dads is strong and develops between men of diverse origins and day jobs. Backstage the Dads offer a fist-pump, straighten a bow tie, give each other

tips, and keep track of time. Last year, new Party Dad Kip McDaniel started a dance-off competition prior to “curtain” to shake off some nerves. Donning dapper costumes, the Dads know they look good and feel their part; they are ready to greet their on-stage wives and children as the familiar overture begins.

The Dads support each other in back stage quick changes from Party to Battle, and say they have the best seat in the house for watching the Company dancers demonstrate their confidence and technical skill. After closing night there is a sense of sadness, of something they loved being a part of now over. Tony says he has not seen the show from the





Cover story photos by Darrell Hoemann

seats for eight seasons, but he knows *The Nutcracker* is an appreciated tradition in the cultural fabric of our community, "I am pleased to have been given the opportunity to be part of it."

One of Brett's highlight moments was the year he played the role of Drosselmeyer and his daughter Taylor played the role of Clara. "She literally brought me into this magical experience of *The Nutcracker*, and being in those moments together on stage was truly something."

A hearty "cheers" to all of our Champaign Urbana Ballet Party Dads, emeritus or brand new. We shall enjoy your camaraderie and creativity on stage at *The Nutcracker*!

## Save the Date

You're Invited to a **"Drink with the Dads"**

Join the Party Dads for a toast on Opening Night of *The Nutcracker*

**Thursday, December 5th at 6:30pm**

Krannert Center Lobby, Stage 5

Admire their dashing costumes up close, and raise a glass before the Dads find their merry way to the Stahlbaum home. Party Dads emeritus, general audience members and families welcome!



# CU Ballet Alumna Erica Johnston

believe that there is beauty and creative potential in anything if you look at it long enough and are willing to vary your perspective.” —Erica Johnston

Erica Johnston is a New York City-based costume designer, choreographer, dancer, and dance instructor. Before she launched her career in the professional dance world, she developed her foundational skills—in ballet, costume design, and teaching—at the Champaign Ballet Academy and with Champaign Urbana Ballet (CU Ballet). Erica kindly took time out of her full schedule to share with us her strong connection to CU Ballet and the creative inspirations she seeks as a costume designer and choreographer.

## CU Ballet—Connections

I would not be where I am today without the training and mentorship I received at CU Ballet. I arrived to their level of pre-professional training much later than my peers [at age 12], and was given tremendous amounts of information, encouragement, and opportunity; I soaked it up like a sponge. CU Ballet also gave me the tools that I needed to catapult into costuming at a high level from a pretty young age. I’ve had a tremendous interest in design for as long as I can remember, and coming to CU Ballet, I was given the opportunity to volunteer in the costume shop. I made my interest known, made myself available to take on work, and Deanna [Deanna Doty, the Artistic Director] really took me under her wing. She gave me progressively larger and larger projects as I got older, encouraged my curiosity, mentored my decision making while allowing me to have creative authority, and provided me access to materials and facilities rarely found outside of major cities. By the time I went to college, I already had a performance experience resumé that reflected the repertoire of any major ballet company, and my costume portfolio followed suit.

## Costume Design—Creative Collaborator, Patterns, Colors

I find inspiration in many places, though primarily it comes from my clients, be they choreographers or dancers, and the work they are bringing me in on as a collaborator. My work rarely exists in a vacuum; a huge part of what I do is dependent on my collaborators’ needs, and it’s up to me to help their vision come to life, while still bringing my own point of view and capabilities to the stage. If I am experimenting on something for fun (or building for my own shop stock), I often search for visual patterns in architecture and wrought ironwork and for color combinations in nature (particularly in fish and birds).

## Choreography—Artistic Vision, Music, Dancers

I always seek to have a clear goal for the piece at the outset: Am I making a statement? Am I challenging my dancer(s) to try something new? Am I asking a question, or conveying an emotion? I am heavily, heavily inspired by the music I’m using, and in fact I won’t start work on a piece until the music is established. I will always listen to my music until I feel I have a confident understanding of its orchestration and nuances and can hear it in my head without needing accompaniment. I’m very interested in equality when choreographing partner work and ways in which dancers can feel empowered and strong while allowing themselves to trust one another and be supported (letting go of control). The short answer: My music, my dancers, and my goal for the piece (not necessarily in that order).

Erica’s beautiful costume designs can be found on her website, [pointcreations.com](http://pointcreations.com), (the company she started when she was 12!), and you can catch more glimpses of her professional life on her Instagram page, [@edjohnst](https://www.instagram.com/edjohnst).

Photo by Brian Thomas

Photo by Dan Merlo

Photo Above: Erica Johnston as Arabian Princess in 2008. See her recreate the role as she returns as a guest artist in CU Ballet’s *The Nutcracker* this December!





# Champaign Urbana Ballet

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# THE NUTCRACKER

 Champaign Urbana Ballet

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