

ARTS & CULTURE

Ballet Memphis to refresh 'Nutcracker,' pay tribute to Americana music

By [Elle Perry](#), Daily Memphian

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Still from a 2020 film of "The Nutcracker," performed by Ballet Memphis dancers. (File photo)

As part of its 37th season, Ballet Memphis is "refreshing" its "Nutcracker" ballet production for the first time in decades.

Artistic director Steven McMahon stressed that the production isn't brand new. But audiences can expect new elements in the company's latest version of the beloved tale.

Ballet Memphis: Season 37

"A Midsummer Night's Dream"

Oct. 13-15, 2023

“The Nutcracker”

Dec. 9-10 and Dec. 15-17, 2023

“Winter Mix”

Feb. 23-25, 2024

“American Roots”

April 19-21, 2024

“We are investing in ... new sets, costumes, new choreography, but everything will still have the same music, energy that people have come to love and expect,” McMahan said.

“We understand the importance of that tradition to our ticket buyers and our community. And so we want to give that experience to everyone, every time,” said Gretchen Wollert McLennon, Ballet Memphis’ CEO and president.

For the first time, two of the largest US ballet companies are in Memphis

Ballet Memphis will perform “The Nutcracker” at the Orpheum Theatre across two weekends — Saturday, Dec. 9 and Sunday, Dec. 10 and Friday, Dec. 15 through Sunday, Dec. 17.

“When you’re dealing with a story that’s been in existence for over 120 years, there are probably things that you can revisit and take a different look at while still once again holding to the story that everyone embraces and knows,” Wollert McLennon said.

“The Nutcracker” is part of the season, which kicks off Friday, Oct. 13, with “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” at Ballet Memphis, 2144 Madison Ave.

“Dreams” is the season’s overall theme.

“Ballet has a long history of dreams and thinking about dreams,” McMahan said.

“Young dancers dream about being a ballerina, about being a swan or a prince. ... And the stage itself is where a choreographer’s dreams are realized.”

Ballet Memphis' "Midsummer" production is based on the Shakespeare play and features choreography by Mark Godden.

"Mark is really theatrical and (has) a lot of humor, so (he) crafted the story in a very clear and concise way that just makes it accessible, really charming," McMahon said. "...You're getting excellent, well-constructed dance, choreography — the steps are excellent. And then you're getting this theatricality that it lives under. And then you're getting something that is quite sensitive and has a great story that touches on all the best parts of (the play)."

Memphis choreographer fuses country music with modern dance

"In Dreams," which Trey McIntyre choreographed as a separate piece for Ballet Memphis, is also part of the "Midsummer" production. It has dance set to Roy Orbison's music.

"It uses ballet in a way that you're like, 'Oh, I didn't know ballet could look like that,'" McMahon said. "And it's not reductive to the sound. It's not cheesy. ... It's not trying to interpret the music. ... It does interpret the music ... (but) in a sophisticated way."

Ballet Memphis' "Winter Mix," a mixed repertoire show, will be held Friday, Feb. 23 through Sunday, Feb. 25 at Playhouse on the Square, 66 Cooper St.

It includes a new work that choreographer Durante Verzola created for Ballet Memphis, as well as Matthew Neenan's "Party of the Year," which is set to music by B.B. King, Ray Charles, Nat King Cole and Joni Mitchell.

Ballet Memphis' Fall Mix features music from Julien Baker, Unapologetic artists

The season closes with "American Roots," which will take place Friday, April 19, though Sunday, April 21, at Crosstown Theater, 1350 Crosstown Ave.

“American Roots” plays tribute to Americana music. It includes new works by Alia Kache of Alvin Ailey Dance Theater, and Ballet Memphis’ Julie Niekrasz and Brandon Ramey choreographed it. The show also features a live house band.

“Memphis and Memphis music has always been a muse for us and how we are building our repertoire and choreography,” Wollert McLennon said. “And when we invite people from outside of Memphis, we oftentimes want them to help share that Memphis dance story.”

[Click here for more information about Ballet Memphis’ 37th season.](#)

TOPICS

BALLET MEMPHIS THE NUTCRACKER



Elle Perry

A native Memphian, Elle Perry has earned graduate degrees from the University of Memphis and Maryland Institute College of Art. She’s written for publications including the Memphis Business Journal, Memphis Flyer and High Ground News, and previously served as coordinator of The Teen Appeal.