

By Katia Bachko

## Nuts to Nutcracker!

Forget the Sugar Plum Fairy! In **Smuin Ballet's *The Christmas Ballet***, it's the Sugar Rum Baby who steals the show. While the holiday season is practically synonymous with *The Nutcracker*, some companies around the country are offering audiences a detour from the Land of the Sweets.

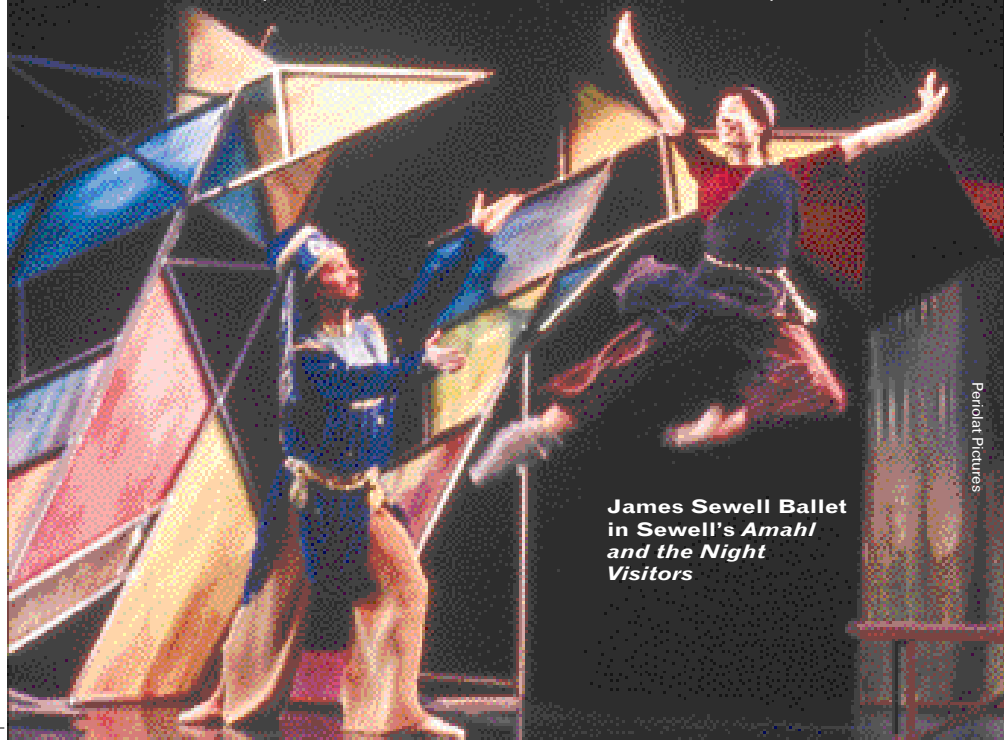
"I realized that there was a ton of great Christmas music already out there," says Smuin Ballet Artistic Director Michael Smuin. So instead of searching for a holiday story, he saw the opportunity to be inventive by drawing inspiration from seasonal music. *The Christmas Ballet* is divided into two sections: Act I is the Classical Christmas, which features Mozart, Bach and other holiday music, and Act II is the Cool Christmas, which combines tap, hula and other dance forms with music ranging from Willie Nelson to Elvis Presley. *The Christmas Ballet* will celebrate its 10th season at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco this year, and there's no chance that Smuin will turn to Tchaikovsky in the future: "There's an epidemic of *Nutcrackers*," he says.

**James Sewell Ballet's holiday show *Amahl and the Night Visitors*** is a traditional story presented in an unconventional way. Sewell enhances the original Gian Carlo Menotti opera with choreography that incorporates American Sign Language to communicate the plot. Menotti's libretto is the

story of a crippled boy who is healed through an innocent and generous act that the Three Kings witness on their way to see the newborn Christ child.

***The Christmas Carol helps Ballet Tennessee "keep its sanity,"*** according to Artistic Director Barry Van Cura. Van Cura's production is an adaptation of the classic with some additions that Dickens may not have intended. Scrooge's signature outburst of "Bah Humbug!" is juxtaposed with The Humbugs, a number by a group of young dancers dressed as the ill-tempered insects.

**Illinois Ballet presents *The Juggler of Notre Dame***, a piece originally choreographed by Artistic Director Mary Price Boday's former teacher, Helen Gregory, in 1964. "It was a fabulous piece," says Price Boday. "I didn't want it to get lost." And while Price Boday has used the original Bach score, she updated the choreography to make it more modern. The story follows a street juggler in a medieval French town who takes shelter from the cold in a church on Christmas Eve. There he encounters a statue of the Virgin Mary, to whom he offers his juggling performance as gift. Touched by the tribute, the statue comes to life and blesses the beggar. Offering lessons of humility and redemption, *The Juggler* is a marked contrast to the celebratory tone of *The Nutcracker*. Says Price Boday, "It gets to the heart of the whole Christmas spirit."



James Sewell Ballet in Sewell's *Amahl and the Night Visitors*

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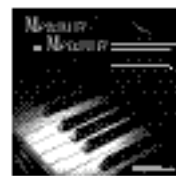
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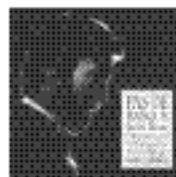
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