AMERICAN MIDWEST BALLET

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Eliza Harden and Mateusz Lojewski (left) are making their debuts this season in the roles of the Dew Drop Fairy and her partner, the Thistle, in the Waltz of the Flowers scene (right) from The Nutcracker. *More photos...*

DANCER DEBUTS ADD EXCITEMENT TO *THE NUTCRACKER*

Dance artists will give fresh takes on iconic roles, and subtle surprises will join beloved traditions, when American Midwest Ballet [AMB] returns the world's favorite holiday ballet, *The Nutcracker*, to metro-area stages in November and December.

"Everyone has their favorite *Nutcracker* traditions, characters, and scenes, and we love returning to those – while also finding ways to keep the experience lively for both dancers and audiences," said AMB artistic director and CEO Erika Overturff. "People who come every year have told me that **they always find lots of little surprises** every time they watch. For example, in the party scene and the mouse battle, I've left room for the dancers to give the characters their own personalities. The party boys find different ways to be naughty in every performance, and the mice find new ways to taunt the soldiers and react to the action."

Another exciting element of each *Nutcracker* season is giving dancers their first chance to perform some of the ballet's best-known roles, Overturff said. Two dancers making especially rewarding role debuts this year, she said, are **Eliza Harden and Mateusz (Mat) Lojewski** as the Dew Drop Fairy and her partner, the Thistle, in the Waltz of the Flowers scene.

Many dancers start out in *The Nutcracker* as children and work their way up through the cast, she said – but Eliza, whose childhood ballet school did not perform it, had danced in it only a few times before she came to AMB three seasons ago. Mat joined AMB last year, she said, but broke a bone in his foot during his second week and had to sit out almost the entire season. Now, she said, the two are relishing the opportunity to dance together and apply their artistry to these highly recognizable roles.

“This is definitely the most featured role I’ve done in AMB’s *Nutcracker*,” Eliza said. “I’ve always loved the Waltz of the Flowers – **the music is just so joyous and exciting**, and I feel like it really builds. It starts out softly and slowly, and by the end it’s a big celebration with everyone on stage. I use the music to help me build the excitement, to inform my dancing. I love the choreography, because it gives me the chance to dance freely and joyously. Also, the Dew Drop is a fairy, so I think about the qualities fairies have: so light and airy, with some regalness… I feel like it’s a great showcase because there’s a lot in there.”

The role of the Thistle, with its blend of elegant partnering and athletic leaps and turns, marks a triumphant comeback for Mat, whose injury limited his dancing last season. “I'm really happy that I'm here because I have such a supportive community. I've made so many friends,” he said. “That whole year that I was injured, I felt very supported and welcome, and I still felt like I was part of a family here, even though I wasn't dancing.”

“I was really nervous to go into this role,” he said. “But Jack Kadzis, who dances it in the other cast, and Richard Marks, who’s done it before, helped talk me through it. They’d say, ‘Rely on your training. You can do this.’ There’s a lot of jumping, which I would say is one of my strengths. **And as we work on the partnering, Eliza and I have gotten a lot closer.** We were already pretty good friends, and now we’re closer friends. We’ve been chatting more. I feel like our communication is great – we can work together and figure out how to make something go well.”

“Mat’s just so much fun,” Eliza said. “It’s important to be able to talk about the details and the choreography and how to fix things and problem-solve, but we also have fun while doing it. It’s always a good time.

“I’ve never been the Dew Drop Fairy before, so **it’s really exciting to explore a new role – and especially with a good friend.** That makes it a lot more fun.”

Performances of *The Nutcracker* will be November 22 and 23 at the Hoff Family Arts and Culture Center in Council Bluffs, and December 4 through 7 at the Orpheum Theater in Omaha. Tickets are on sale now; information is available at https://amballet.org/tickets/

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ABOUT AMERICAN MIDWEST BALLET

American Midwest Ballet [AMB] is the region's resident professional dance company, bringing work beyond words to audiences in Nebraska, Iowa, and beyond. Performing at home and on tour, our mission is to inspire people through dance programs of the highest quality: breathtaking performances, enriching education, and uplifting community engagement.

AMB's Season 16 is presented with the generous support of premiere benefactors the Holland Foundation, the Iowa West Foundation, the Heider Family Foundation, and Douglas County; season sponsor Omaha Steaks; production sponsors Polina and Bob Schlott; and major supporters the Nebraska Arts Council, the Nebraska Cultural Endowment, and the Sherwood Foundation.