

weekend

Growing up in 'The Nutcracker'

Aspen native returns
to dance professionally
in 'The Nutcracker'



PHOTO BY ANNA STONEHOUSE

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JUST 15 MINUTES FROM ASPEN



ANNA STONEHOUSE/THE ASPEN TIMES

Aspen Santa Fe Ballet School alumna Cassie Lewis, center, returns to Aspen as professional dancer in "The Nutcracker."

'It's a big, full-circle moment'

Cassie Lewis returns to Aspen Santa Fe Ballet for 'The Nutcracker'

Andrew Travers
The Aspen Times

When she was a preschooler, Cassie Lewis took the stage in Aspen Santa Fe Ballet's annual production of "The Nutcracker" as a bumblebee.

The Aspen native returned to the production every year through the end of high school, moving up the ranks to play a Party Girl by her senior year at Aspen High School. In between, she played a mouse, a soldier, multiple dolls and a grape, while also excelling in contemporary ballets and drawing national notice for her talent.

This weekend, Lewis — now 23 and based in Manhattan — will be back onstage when the curtain goes up on "The Nutcracker" at the Aspen District Theatre, returning as a professional dancer in Aspen Santa Fe's annual epic.

"It's a big full-circle moment for me," Lewis said outside the Aspen Santa Fe studio during a recent rehearsal break. "And, trust me, I understand the gravity of that. It's very special."

A standout in the local company's dance school, Lewis went to New York after high school to study at the prestigious Ailey Fordham BFA program — a partnership between Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and Fordham University. Double-majoring in dance and economics, she

graduated in 2016.

In the summers through college, she landed performance internships with companies like the National Ballet of Canada and Ballet BC in Vancouver and began landing professional roles. These days she splits her time between freelance ballet gigs with a job as a litigation paralegal at a New York law firm.

This winter has been a sweet homecoming. Performing as one of the moms in the big opening party scene of the ballet, Lewis watched a new generation of girls playing the bumblebee part that Lewis did when she was 4 — she couldn't help but get nostalgic.

"I'm thrilled to be here, to be looking at a little girl running around and to be thinking, 'I was that girl,'" she said.

LEWIS, B6

“This company 100 percent shaped me and what I wanted to do. They made me the dancer I always wanted to be.”

Cassie Lewis
Dancer





ASPEN TIMES FILE

Aspen Santa Fe Ballet will present four performances of "The Nutcracker" on Saturday and Sunday.

LEWIS

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As a child, she recalled, the pros and company members were monumental figures that she admired.

"Every day when the company was rehearsing I would stand in that window and watch them," she said. "All the different choreographers. All the movements. And then I'd try to mimic what they were doing at home."

On a recent afternoon, Lewis was back in the company's basement studio with artistic director Tom Mossbrucker making minor adjustments on her and the cast in the iconic "Snow" scene of the Christmas classic. Some of her earliest memories are of ballet classes with Mossbrucker and executive director Jean-Philippe Malaty, who she admits intimidated her as a child but who would nurture her as she grew into an artist.

"This company 100 percent shaped me and what I wanted to do," Lewis said. "They made me the dancer I always wanted to be."

In high school, Lewis danced nearly everyday and intensely devoted herself to the pursuit — on wintertime Saturdays, for example, when most Aspen teenagers would be skiing, Lewis would be in the dance studio. But she said the lessons she learned in the School of Aspen Santa Fe Ballet prepared her for life both on and off stage.

"They really care about the human in the dancer and the individual," she said. "It's an amazing environment."

This past year may prove pivotal in Lewis' dancing career. After a lengthy audition process with Ballet BC in the spring, Lewis didn't land an apprenticeship she had been hoping for. Disappointed and disillusioned, she stopped taking ballet classes for the first time in her life. Not dancing for three months, she re-evaluated the place dance holds in her life.

"I was questioning, 'Should I even be

IF YOU GO ...

What: 'The Nutcracker,' presented by Aspen Santa Fe Ballet

Where: Aspen District Theatre

When: Saturday, 2 p.m. and 7:30 p.m.; Sunday, 1 p.m. and 5 p.m.

How much: \$36 to \$124

Tickets: www.aspensantafeballet.com

dancing?" she recalled. "As you get older, other things play into life like, 'Do I want to go to law school?' 'What about my job?' In high school, I was always the girl who knew what I wanted to do. I wanted to be a dancer."

As she searched her soul, Lewis reached out to Mossbrucker, who invited her to take a role in "The Nutcracker" this winter. Her bosses at the law firm supported the idea, allowing her to work remotely from here through the "Nutcracker" season.

Coming home and returning to perform with the company where it all began, she said, felt like the natural next right thing to do.

"I think I was always trying to find this company in a different place that wasn't Aspen, because I wasn't sure if I wanted to come back," she said.

Next weekend, she and the company will give an additional four performances in Santa Fe. After that, Lewis is sticking around Aspen through the holidays to spend time with family and to ski.

"I am very thrilled to be here," she said. "When your plane lands in Aspen and the flight attendant says, 'If Aspen is your final destination, welcome home,' I'm always like, 'Gosh, it's really home.'"

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