

Spectacular Surprises

By Virginia Hughes

Baltimore's newest holiday tradition has plenty of unexpected delights in store.

Last December, two days before opening night of the BSO's *Holiday Spectacular*, a package was delivered to executive producer Dori Armor and costume designer David Burdick: 10 pairs of gold leather elf shoes. "They were all handmade for each elf. It took a month to make them," Armor recalls. The team soon discovered, however, that the shoes for the largest elf—"he was the size of a football player," Armor says—were much too small.

It was down-to-the-wire decision time for Armor: Should the largest elf just wear a different pair?





PHOTO BY TRACEY BROWN

Should all of the elves wear the same shoes, for uniformity's sake? "Ultimately we just decided to slice his shoes and shove his foot in there, hoping nobody could see it," Armor laughs.

The show must go on. And with this year's *Holiday Spectacular* set for two acts, hundreds of costumes, 200 lighting cues a cast of more than 75 singers and dancers and 65 orchestral musicians, last-minute production surprises are inevitable.

But surprises are in store, too, for the audience members—even those who saw the show in 2005 and 2006. They can look forward to a couple of perennial favorites, like the reindeer flying overhead during "Twas the Night Before Christmas," and the tap-dancing Santas that close the first act. But the rest of the show is brand new. "People might assume that since the show has the same name, that they're going to see the same thing every year," says choreographer Jennifer Ladner. "But every time you see it, the show will surprise you. It's like opening a little Christmas present—actually, a very, very big Christmas present."

months of planning

First performed in Baltimore in 2005, *Holiday Spectacular* is based on a similar production: the Indianapolis Symphony *Yuletide Celebration*. BSO *Holiday Spectacular* director David Levy, a playwright and theatrical lyricist based in New York City, has directed *Yuletide Celebration* for the past 14 years, as well as many other holiday pops shows across the country. Levy says the Baltimore audience took to the show like none other. "From the very first year, *Holiday Spectacular* snowballed in popularity," he says, leading many to joke that it was "a miracle on Cathedral Street." Due to its popularity, 12 performances are scheduled this year, up from last year's nine, Levy says, "because we knew we could fill up the hall. It's really becoming a Baltimore tradition."

Pre-production for this year's show began in May, when Levy started mapping out the acts with Armor, music director Jack Everly and lighting designer Stuart Duke. In August, they held local auditions to fill out the cast of singers. Levy says well over 100 local performers auditioned, of which 15 were chosen. He estimates that 75 percent of the cast is from the Baltimore area.

By early autumn, Levy and choreographer

Jennifer Ladner had determined the steps that she would eventually teach the two dozen student dancers from the Baltimore School for the Arts (BSA). "It's a very dance-oriented show this year," says Ladner, who's long been involved in the Indianapolis *Yuletide* show and has choreographed the BSO *Holiday Spectacular* since its inception.

In addition to the Dancing Santas number and "The Twelve Days of Christmas"—an epic piece that includes the entire cast on stage at once—the BSA dancers will perform some of their own choreography from *The Nutcracker*. The BSA dancers started rehearsals in October.

Those in the audience who saw last year's show will recognize the Dancing Santas number just before intermission. But even this favorite's choreography is different than last year, Ladner says. For one thing, the Dancing Santas will be on stage for the entire piece, instead of just capping the beginning and end. "It's carried completely by the Santas this year, which makes it much harder for the dancers because they don't get a break," Ladner says.

For Levy, one of the most satisfying aspects of working with this group of Baltimore's young talent is giving them the opportunity to work with New York professionals. Last year, he was surprised to see that the student dancers always stuck around the



PHOTO BY TRACEY BROWN

Scenes from the 2006 *Holiday Spectacular*

"Audiences don't lie—and from the minute the curtain goes up, the excitement is really palpable."



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studio after rehearsal to watch the professionals. "It was really great to see them observe and appreciate the work ethic," he says.

one week and counting

The most difficult part about putting on the BSO's *Holiday Spectacular*, Levy says, is the timing: Such a technically sophisticated show normally demands much more time for on-stage preparation. But since the Meyerhoff is booked solid in the weeks preceding *Holiday Spectacular*, "you just don't have the luxury of that much time," he explains. The entire production is staged in a little more than one week. So the performers, who must learn so much so quickly, "have got to be up to snuff." Rehearsals begin just a couple of weeks before the first performance in a studio

on the lower level of the Meyerhoff. In those final days, it's not unusual for the cast to rehearse for 10 or 12 hours a day.

The cast's exuberance is evident in Levy's favorite story from last year's show, concerning the chorus line of high-kicking Santas. The Santas had been told to kick with as much energy as possible until the curtain came down to cover their legs. On opening night, the curtain got stuck. But the Santas just kept on kicking. "I'm sitting there in the audience with my mouth open, thinking 'please, someone stop them already,'" Levy says, laughing. When the curtain did finally come down—"with a big boom"—the audience understood what had happened and gave the indomitable dancers a rousing ovation. "It was like they were clapping for soldiers marching into battle," he recalls.

like Broadway theater

Even before the curtain rises, the *Holiday Spectacular* audience will swoon over the physical transformation of the Meyerhoff, predicts executive producer Armor: "By the time we're done with the set, people think they're walking into a Broadway theater."

Armor likens BSO *Holiday Spectacular* to "Radio City meets a symphony orchestra." And the big-budget talent requires, well, a big budget: just shy of \$1 million.

After such a successful first season in 2005, last year the BSO made a valuable investment in a brand-new *Holiday Spectacular* set for the Meyerhoff, including new draperies, a new lighting design and, perhaps most obviously, the two 30-foot *Nutcracker* statues that flank the stage. (See "One on One," page 14)

Putting up the lighting might be the most frenzied job of all, according to lighting designer Stuart Duke, who's worked on the Baltimore show all three years and on the Indianapolis *Yuletide* show for 20. "If you were doing a production of this kind in New York, you'd be in rehearsals and tech productions for weeks," he says. "We do it all in about three days."

This extremely tight timetable is only possible because the crew comes in prepared. Duke has already determined the 200-plus different lighting cues the audience will see throughout the night. And the team has already ordered the necessary equipment, and laid out exactly where the lights will go. Duke's lighting team of three designers and about six electricians work on two basic kinds of lighting systems: "intelligent" lights and conventional lights. Intelligent lights are computerized and, once programmed, "can execute intricately choreographed moves," Duke says, including zooming in and out and changing colors. Conventional lights are preset by the technicians.

With all of the eye-popping sets and costumes, familiar holiday melodies and fantastic performances, the lighting might be

one of the most underappreciated elements of *Holiday Spectacular*. Success, for Duke, is often understated: "The show needs to come together in a seamless way. The lighting makes the scenery look terrific, but it should never distract from the performance."

something for everybody

And the result of all this intense preparation? "Truly something for everybody," Levy says, "from young children, to teens, to adults."

"'Twas the Night Before Christmas," a retelling of Clement Clarke Moore's classic tale, has been a crowd favorite since BSO *Holiday Spectacular's* premiere. Puppeteers approach the stage from the back of the theater, with their puppets propped on very long poles, so that the audience can look over their heads to see reindeer pulling Santa's sleigh.

In addition to the orchestral music arranged by Jack Everly, the audience will hear a broad variety of music throughout the night. This year's BSO *Holiday Spectacular* host is Broadway tenor Mike Eldred, who has also performed in concert with symphonies throughout the world and is perhaps most famous for



playing the starring role of Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables* on Broadway. The show also features soprano opera singer N'Kenge Simpson-Hoffman.

Another new segment features familiar Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons song melodies paired with new holiday lyrics. "So 'Sherry, baby' becomes 'Santa, baby,'" Levy says.

The dancing styles, too, change throughout the night. "You'll see ballet, including pointe work, you'll see jazz, tap dancing and even Irish clogging!" Ladner says. The six-member O'Hare Irish dance troupe from Chicago will perform with a local Celtic dance ensemble in "I Saw Three Ships Come Sailing In."

"The Twelve Days of Christmas" begins with a ballerina and ends with more than 40 performers joining the orchestra on stage. "The piece is really fun, really playful, and takes the audience by surprise because ... well, I don't want to give it away," Ladner says.

Ladner wasn't surprised at how quickly BSO *Holiday Spectacular* became popular. "Baltimore was hungry for a holiday show like this," she says. "Last year, I saw people coming away really feeling that they'd seen something special. It's a world-class show, right here in the Baltimore community."

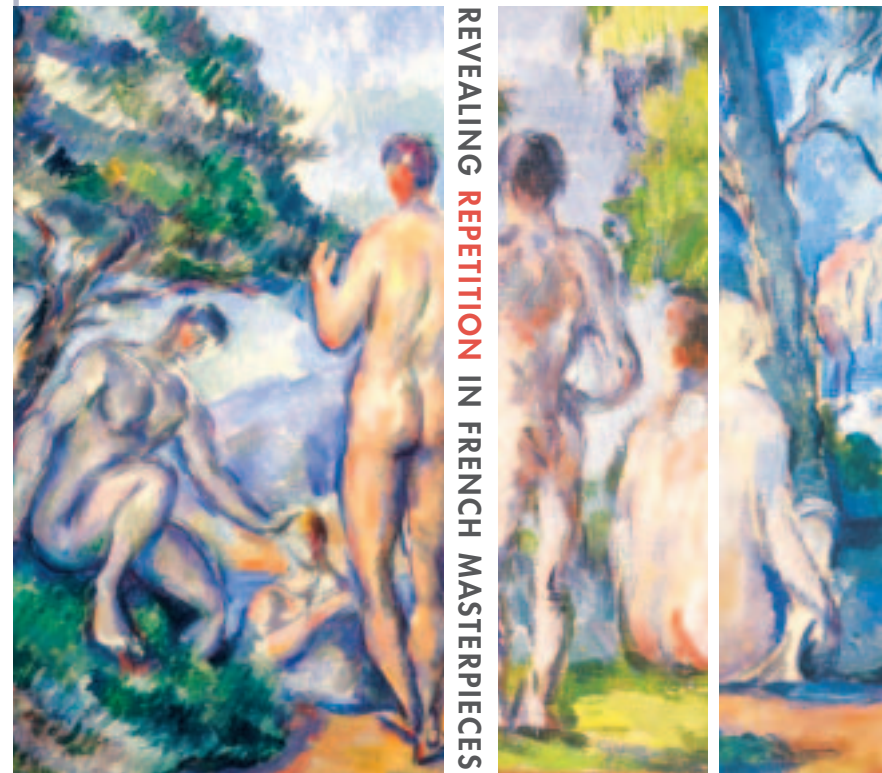
Says Levy, "The gratification for me is being in the audience every night and seeing their response. Audiences don't lie—and from the minute the curtain goes up, the excitement is really palpable."

Armor says that the show has already become a tradition for many families, including her own. "I'm proud to say that I was involved in getting it off its feet. It's the kind of production I take my children to see. I hope it's a tradition they will continue when they have families of their own one day."

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