

Dance company creates winter wonderland in new holiday show

By Larry Nichols
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Out choreographer Brian Sanders and his company, JUNK, are getting into the holiday spirit with their latest production, "Snowball," a family-friendly dance performance and urban winter fairytale.

Yes, you read it right.

JUNK is putting on a family-friendly show. We were shocked to hear it too, but Sanders points out that people who only know the group's edgier work don't know the full scope of the shows his company performs on a regular basis.

"Primarily because of Fringe Festival, JUNK is well-known for being inappropriate for a family audience, but we actually do quite a bit of touring with a family-oriented show and we actually have a dedicated children's program," Sanders said. "Although part of us are known for our boundary-pushing, there's another part of us that performs every year at the Philadelphia International Children's Festival. We perform at the Art Museum for Family Night Out. So it's not really a new endeavor for me."

Yet, while children's shows are nothing new for Sanders, getting into the spirit of the season is.

"What is new for me is a holiday show," he said. "It's been an underlying fantasy, dream and compulsion of mine for years and I finally got up the courage to go for it."

Set to a soundtrack of '80s music, "Snowball" follows a group of colorful characters (lost boys, toad kings and a fairy godmother) journeying through a bleak and unforgiving winter, eventually finding their way into a frozen fantasia where an evil ice queen must be defeated to bring their city back to life.

"It's celebration of the holiday spirit," Sanders said about the inspiration for the show. "When I was 11 years old, I performed in 'The Nutcracker,' and it was one of my first big onstage productions. I've become a Nutcracker addict ever since. I always wanted to do some version of my own Nutcracker. There have been so many modern-dance Nutcrackers and I didn't want to go that way, so I'm trying something new by putting JUNK in a holiday-show environment and by creating a holiday show that isn't typical."

We assumed that Sanders would be drawing inspiration from many of the animated holiday specials we watched as children, but we found out, surprisingly enough, that he missed out on a lot of those experiences.

"I grew up without a television for most

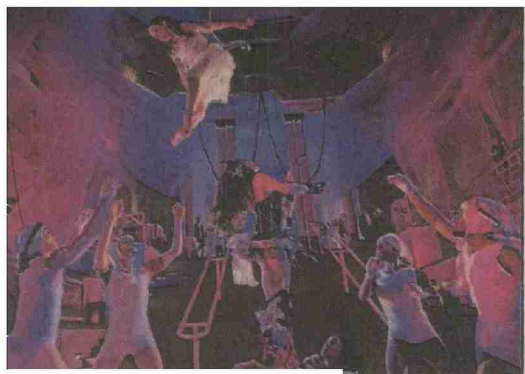


Photo: Ted Lieberman

of my young life," he admitted.

Whaaat? For real?

"I actually didn't have any [favorite Christmas specials]," he said. "I have a hole in my heart in the sense of holiday shows. As a kid, there was a lot of live performing arts but the holidays weren't a time of year to go see shows. So maybe that's what it is and where the compulsion [to do this show] comes from."

Sanders said the show is equally entertaining for young and old but that one segment of the audience is slightly more important when he considers the appeal.

"The younger audience are always the best critics," he said. "They rule the day in that respect. The younger audiences are also more open. I'm also very driven to make it appealing to both, having an adult appeal and a childlike sense of fantasy at the same time. It's really important for me to have a Bugs Bunny-style of cartoon life that is amusing and humorous for adults and slapstick-funny for kids."

And if the humor doesn't grab the youngsters' attention, the snowball fight that breaks the fourth wall with the audience will.

"That's one thing that I don't like that I'm going to try and do," Sanders said about live-audience participation. "I've never liked it as an audience member. The audience gets to partake. I feel like JUNK's mission is to make dance more accessible, to make it friendlier and not so stuffy. The audience won't have to sit quietly with their hands crossed. Maybe once or twice I've wanted to throw cabbage on the stage, if I must confess. And now I'm giving the audience permission to throw their own version of cabbage, which will be snowballs." ■

The Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts presents "Snowball" by Brian Sanders JUNK. Dec. 4-15 at Harold Prince Theatre, 3680 Walnut St. For more information or tickets, call 215-898-3900 or visit annenbergcenter.org or briansandersjunk.com/snowball.

