

 /nightspots

 @nightspotschicago



nightspots

weekly nightlife section in 



Photo by Kirk Williamson

Big Chicks turns the big 3-0

BY GRETCHEN RACHEL HAMMOND

There was a flurry of activity the morning Windy City Times arrived at the Uptown bar Big Chicks.

The cozy, adjoining restaurant Tweet was filled with people enjoying brunch while taking in the insulated relaxation of bygone eras that, like the smell of freshly brewed coffee, saturate the walls and can be relived in selections of old magazines or the art celebrating a beauty that has become a stranger to the ugliness of what is increasingly trending as Trump's America.

Beyond the narrow entry to Big Chicks, a small army of people were hard at work hammering wood into place, painting and re-varnishing while preparing the bar for another night when it will be packed from end-to-end with customers across the age, racial and gender spectrum including representatives of each of the letters on the LGBTQIA umbrella.

It is the way Big Chicks has always remained because it is the tone owner Michelle Fire set from the very beginning. The bar was a 2016 Chicago LGBT Hall of Fame inductee, and Fire beamed from the stage at the Chicago History Museum during the induction ceremony last month.

Fire was varnishing a table when famed Chicago artist Zuleyka Benitez—who has been a part of the business since it opened on Dec. 11, 1986 at 7 a.m.—approached her with a selection of paint colors on some cardboard.

Benitez helped to create the durable, vintage look of each incarnation of the interior that has evolved around the restored 1940s Brunswick Company bar which came with the building, and decorated with an art collection spanning 40 years. She even installed the door buzzer.

Fire made her choice of color and Benitez said she would be back in double time from the hardware store with the paint.

Renovations will be either finished or put on pause before the bar opens for the evening.

For the past 30 years, Big Chicks has remained open every single day. It is a consistency that comes with one standing rule: there are no judgments to be made.

Everyone is welcome except those who pour hatred into glasses and allow it to intoxicate them.

"You have to be inclusive," Fire said. "Even from the beginning it was very clear who would be welcome and who wouldn't. People who don't operate on inclusion stand out very quickly. They don't want to be here and we don't want them here."

Fire has a larger than life personality that



Michelle Fire (third from left) at the induction of Big Chicks into the Chicago LGBT Hall of Fame, last month at the Chicago History Museum.

Photo by Gretchen Rachel Hammond

would make fools cautious.

However, those who have the fortune of stopping her for even a 30-minute conversation leave instantly energized by her virulent pizzazz.

Fire said she wanted her preferred gender pronouns to be "old."

It would have been both an inaccurate and complicated a story of a reluctant barkeep who created an LGBTQ home and so a community in the unlikelyst of places.

"I'm just being a bitch about myself," Fire said with a laugh. "You've got to have a sense of humor about yourself."

She paused to call over to her bartender who was stacking glasses.

"Bill? We're doing an interview here, can you clank at the other end of the bar please?"

Bill grumbled a response but acquiesced. It was an exchange which cemented the idea that everyone who works at Big Chicks is as much a family as those they serve.

Fire went on to describe herself as an "urban child" raised on the West Side of Chicago to a small, lower-working class family. She went to public school and attained a degree in art history from the University of Illinois

"I grew up without a television, without a car," she said. "I made art for about 10 years. I was in all kinds of shows and did all kinds of fun stuff."

Among that fun stuff was being a part of Artemisia—a women's collective gallery which was one of the heights of the city's cultural landscape for 30 years. Fire joined after selling her own nonprofit studio Untitled in Andersonville.

"The '70s was the era of collaborative, artist-run spaces," Fire said. "You did your own work and you curated work from outside bringing people in from all over. Chicago was a big hub of art activity. It was an exciting moment. That was before [Ronald] Reagan cut all the N.E.A. [National Endowment for the Arts] funding."

In 1979, Fire started working in gay bars.

"It was a moment when the world was not quite so accepting and embracing," she said. "So the gay community centered on bars and certain organizations because that's what there was. The bars and the printed newspapers were very much the way people communicated."

Like so many who were part of the community in the '80s, Fire lost an entire generation of friends to HIV/AIDS.

"By the time I opened up Big Chicks in '86, a whole bunch of friends were in hospice," she recalled. "It was just overwhelming. Illinois Masonic [hospital] had whole floors of people that I knew. It looked like the end of the world."

While Fire acknowledged that, in life, many people have a plan, when it came to starting Big Chicks she didn't have idea one.

"I was working at this huge bar called The Loading Dock," she said. "I was a saving my money but looking for an opportunity to move into a different moment. I knew a woman Anna Benedetto who owned The Swan Club and a little grill on Argyle right around the corner from where Big Chicks is right now. Every morning, I would get off work and go there and have breakfast and we'd talk. She told me that Charlie, who owned this little bar around the corner where my mother used to drink, was selling the bar."

"I really didn't want to go into the bar business," Fire added. "I knew how hard it was. It's kind of an outcast profession. It was interesting when these corporations you'd do business with, like liquor corporations, would have an event and I would go first as a woman, second as a gay bar owner. You were always kind of the odd woman out. So it's a profession that's not conducive to women or gay people. It's a very small subculture."

It wasn't the idea of a bar which appealed to Fire so much as it was the place once called The Sheridan Lounge which literally drew upon her imagination.

"It's a beautiful Art Deco, terracotta building, like the kind I used to make art with," she said. "I'd looked at it many times and thought 'I love it.'"

Then she went inside.

"Like Bette Davis said [in Beyond the Forest] 'what a dump!'" Fire recalled with an almost perfect imitation. "As happenstance would have it, the owner didn't want to sell it to anyone he knew. So he sold it to this lesbian who he thought would fuck all of his friends over."

For the next six years, Fire, alongside Benitez, set about renovating and evolving Bette Davis's 'dump' into a place deserving of the name with which Fire christened it.

Big Chicks took root after Fire made a trip to India and was singled out by a group of local men in Bandra who pointed at her and yelled, "Big Chick! Big Chick!"

"It was a moment in time that was so surreal, but I thought 'this has got some meaning,'" Fire said. "So when I bought the bar I had to use it."

While Fire changed the name, initially the bar's patronage remained the same—or so she thought until they decided to come clean with her.

"It was a daytime bar at first," she said. "The street was so rough, nobody was out after nine [p.m.]. So there were a lot of old timers doing shots with their Chihuahuas. It was fabulous. It turns out half the people in there were old queens who never told anybody they were gay. I inherited two bartenders who came with the business. They were gay. It was like, this totally, undercover subculture where everybody had these secret lives, but the minute I got here it was like 'Umm Michelle, I just want to let you know I'm gay.'"

The name Big Chicks was also a cause of confusion for the next 30 years.

"If I had a dollar for everyone who told me 'I remember when it was a lesbian bar,'" Fire said. "It's never been a lesbian bar. It was a growth experience for me too. I took every penny I had to make the business work, try to stay in business and mold it in into what I wanted it to be. It's been an all-consuming 30 years."

There is much that is synonymous with Big Chicks; the Sunday brunch in the back, the art on the walls which has attracted museum owners from all over the world, but most of all, the sense of family—customers and staff who have been integral to the business for three decades.

"I am very partial to the notion that the

the DISH

Weekly Dining Guide in
WINDY CITY TIMES

SAVOR NaKorn

BY ANDREW DAVIS

A lot of us have our favorite local Thai restaurants that we visit, indulging in curry dishes or other items that are some almost exotic version of comfort food

NaKorn (1622 Orrington Ave., Evanston; NaKornKitchen.com) also offers Thai food—but it's probably unlike anything you've tried.

Sam Rattanopas told Windy City Times that she and partner Mina Sudsaard that the inspiration for NaKorn was that they wanted to serve dishes like they had growing up—and that they couldn't find anything locally. The result are some incredibly delicious dishes that are only surpassed by their artful presentation.

The decor is charming and pretty artful itself, down to the cage light fixes and the mural of Bhumbol Adulyadej, the late king of Thailand who recently died at age 88. (The mural shows him in his 30s, Rattanopas said.)



Tapioca pearl crackers with tamarind-coconut sauce and cilantro (left) and sirloin at NaKorn.
Photos by Andrew Davis

Appetizers included housemade tapioca pearl crackers—which are just okay by themselves, but excellent when paired with the accompanying tamarind-coconut sauce and cilantro. My dining partner practically inhaled the taro chicken (which is marinated in lemongrass-infused coconut milk), and we both really liked the tenderloin.

Regarding the entrees, the top sirloin (coconut cream curry sauce) was sufficiently tender. I ordered the jumbo lump crab meat—and, coming from the Chesapeake Bay area, my expectations were not that high, as some local restaurants have served some disastrous seafood items. However, I was pleasantly surprised the crab (served on a bed of noodles) at NaKorn. And to show we weren't

total carnivores, we tried the fried tofu with fri-see—which I adored, thanks in part to the chili-tamarind peanut paste. Again, I cannot stress the artistry of the dishes enough.

A chocolate mousse with candied pecans and vanilla ice cream was not as unique as some of the other dishes—but it still provided a more-than-satisfying ending to the meal.

The only drawback for some might be the location, as some people I know won't even venture beyond their immediate neighborhoods. However, this is one trip that is worth it.

Note: Restaurant profiles are based on invitations arranged by restaurants and/or firms.

BIG CHICKS from page 16

[LGBTQ] community is a very interesting community," Fire said. "Diverse, eclectic, educated and marvelous."

Big Chicks has mirrored the community it serves.

"The space has functioned as a stand-alone bar, as a dance venue on weekends," Fire said. "We've had performance art, lesbian speed dating, you name it. There's so many things that have been here over 30 years, I can't remember them all."

One moment Fire does remember was when a greedy developer tried to put an end to Big Chicks.

"Around 2002, they wanted this piece of land," she said. "They were trying to force me out so they created this kerfuffle with City Hall about me being close to a defunct synagogue. It was a pivotal moment. The city was going to close me down because someone had called and complained. I am sure it was the developer who wanted to force me out. It was two years of hell."

But it was a hell in which what Fire calls "the Big Chicks community" would be damned before they were going to let it consume their beloved bar.

"They rallied, they petitioned, they organized demonstrations, they went to court," Fire said. "Eventually Greg Harris and [then-state Rep.] Larry McKeon helped push through an exemption to the law. I had to go to every block club in the neighborhood to petition to stay here. I said 'what would you like from me?' They said 'We'd like you to open a restaurant.'"

Tweet was born in a closed Vietnamese restaurant next door.

"I had a stove and that was it," Fire said. "So I brought cooks in, worked on a menu and got the place up and running. I never wanted to own a gay bar. I never wanted to run a restaurant. Now we are in our 14th year at Tweet and our 30th here."

But, like Fire, her customers remain invested in Big Chicks heart and soul.

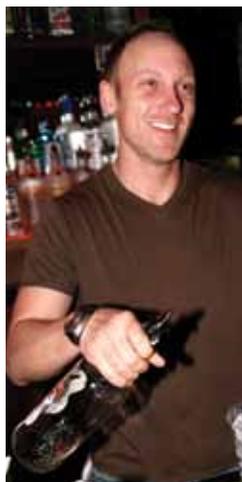
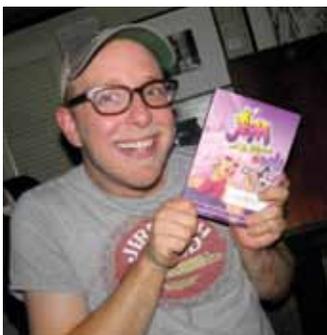
"People tell me, 'I met my lover there 20 years ago and we're still together,'" Fire said. "Staying in business, staying successful and being a part of the community has been a win for everybody."

For more information on Big Chicks, visit BigChicks.com.

BEHIND BAR: BIG CHICKS

In salute to the 30th anniversary of Big Chicks, here some of our favorite photos of the staff, from the Nightspots archives.

Various photographers





Anderson Cooper has dished on his non-romance with Andy Cohen. CNN photo



"Andy and I were first set up on a blind date, which never happened 'cause we had a phone call and after two minutes I said, 'I'm not dating this guy.' He broke my cardinal rule, which is he mentioned my mom within the first four sentences of meeting me. If somebody does that, it's a deal-breaker. And we're never going on a date."—Anderson Cooper talks about his aborted romantic relationship with Andy Cohen. Imagine how shocked Coop would have been if Cohen showed up for their date in a pair of Gloria Vanderbilt jeans ... or with a pet swan!

I spent most of last week in New York City. Because I know many of you travel during the holidays, I'll tell you which shows to see, and which ones to skip. At the top of the list of anyone reading this column is the revival of **Falsettos**. It is the best production and cast of this show you'll ever see, although what was once edgy and groundbreaking is somewhat dated today. Rather than play it as a period piece, the show is time-ambiguous, which works if you don't think about it too much.

Along with the illness that is never named, the pitfalls of coming out, relationships and parenting are still salient. Holding it all together is a masterful performance by **Christian Borle**—whose deflated arms prove that nothing lasts forever. As Marvin, he is never less than captivating vocally and dramatically. **Stephanie J. Block** plays the role of his ex-wife with enormous color and nuances. This made her "I'm Breaking Down" less schtick and more devastating. I was less enthralled by **Andrew Rannells**, who plays Borle's lover. I'm surely in the minority of people who felt that his very specific talents were not a natural fit here. Throughout the show, I kept thinking how wonderful he must have been in Hedwig!

There's no doubt that the hit of this Broadway season will be **Dear Evan Hansen**, a new musical about teen angst, suicide, social media and coming of age. The show created quite a buzz last season off-Broadway, and that built-in audience has led to a frenzy reminiscent of the lead-up to Hamilton. The preview performance I attended was like a rock show, with palpable electricity in the audience from the moment the curtain rose. The show speaks to anyone who has felt like an outsider. Major kudos to **Ben Platt** (from Pitch Perfect), who is a shoo-in Tony winner. Truth be told, there's nary a misstep in the entire production.

In the annals of theater, **The Front Page** is legendary. The caliber of the cast in the current revival is a luxury rarely accorded to a Broadway show; perhaps the strictly limited run helped lock in the best people. Once you get past the dense first act, hold onto your seat, because the show flies. **John Slattery** (with curious hair) may lead the show, but it's **Nathan Lane** who galvanizes it with a frenetic presence that just sucks you into its wake. I'd be remiss if I didn't mention the transcendent **Holland Taylor**, who gives everyone a run for their money, and Robert Morse, who all but steals the show with two tiny scenes. It's a must-see.

The 39-year-old heir to the Fiat empire, **Lapo Elkann**, was just arrested for faking his own kidnapping. And he was arrested along with a transgender hooker ... eh, escort! Lapo flew into NYC on Thanksgiving and called several female escorts. One of them directed Lapo to a person

who has been identified as a 29-year-old transgender hooker named **Curtis McKinstry**. The two were holed up in what has been referred to as a housing project and embarked on what The Daily Beast called a "two-day booze and blow bender."

When his cash ran out, he told relatives that a woman had kidnapped him and demanded a \$10,000 ransom or he would be "hurt." \$10K? For the Fiat heir? With apologies to Bette Midler, was he kidnapped by K-Mart? Elkann didn't count on a couple of things: 1) His family would report the kidnapping to the NYPD and b) they knew he called from his own cell phone! How do you say schmuck in Italian? The cops set up a plan to pay the ransom, and then arrested Lapo and his lap dog when they showed up to collect the dough. At first, Elkann tried to pin the blame on the hooker, who until that point had stayed quiet. Well, don't diss a transgender hooker—s/he'll cut a bitch! The escort turned the tables, and the cops let that person go. Elkann was charged with making a false police report, but apparently that doesn't warrant bail. He was released and is due in court in January.

For the first of this week's Billy's Holiday Gift Giving Suggestions, let me urge you all to do your shopping at **Target**. The retailer is facing a massive boycott from the American Family Association and couldn't care less. The group has collected 1.2 million signatures on their petition promising to boycott Target because of the company's support of LGBT rights. The group is upset that Target has gone against North Carolina's HB2 law and allowed people to use whatever bathroom they want to. CEO Brian Cornell said, "We've had a long history of embracing diversity and inclusion. ... What's been lost in this story is the fact that the vast majority of our stores—actually over 1,400 of our stores—already have a family restroom. And we're committed over the next few months to make sure every one of our stores has that option, because we want our guests to be welcomed in our stores." Bravo, Brian.

And now, let's meld shopping, holidays, theater and activism together. Every year, Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS releases a Broadway Legends ornament. This year, it is **Patti LuPone**. La LuPone is featured in her Evita regalia with her arms borne aloft. How could you not want to see Patti hanging from a tree? I mean that in the figurative, non-hooded way! It costs \$70—and it's tax-deductible. Order one now at Broadway-Cares.org.

In a final gift, I'm sure you saw the mega-hot Flaunt photo session of singer Shawn Mendes and wondered if the rumored nude pics exist. Both Shawn and I are "excited" to show them to you on BillyMasters.com.

When we're flaunting photos of fluffed fellas, it's time to end yet another column. Yes, this was a theatre-heavy column. You can get more variety at BillyMasters.com, the site that celebrates diversity ... one dick at a time (OK, sometimes two at a time). If you have a question for me, send it along to Billy@BillyMasters.com and I promise to get back to you before the heir to the Fiat fortune brings a date to a Target restroom! Until next time, remember: One man's filth is another man's bible.

WEDNESDAY DECEMBER 14

ALL THINGS BEYONCÉ SIDETRACK

DANCE TO QUEEN B ALL NIGHT! 9PM-2AM NO COVER

BEYLICIOUS DRAG BY ALL THINGS BEY CONTEST

DIDA RITZ THE VIXEN SAYA NAOMI DANCE, SING OR LIP SYNC TO WIN PRIZES

HOSTED BY DIXIE LYNN CARTWRIGHT

3349 N HALSTED SIDETRACKCHICAGO.COM @SIDETRACKBAR NO COVER

SIDETRACK HOLIDAY PARTY 2016

THURSDAY DECEMBER 15 6PM-2AM

SEASON OF Love

Enjoy! Complimentary food from Yoshi's, Amazing Edibles and Venicesi Pizza

Cheers! \$2 Well Drinks & Domestic Beer \$2.50 Frozen and all other cocktails

Win! HAMILTON tickets, Airfare and more! Drawings at 8pm & 11pm

Give! BRING A DONATION Paper products, cleaning supplies, upcoming items or coffee OR MAKE A DONATION at the door to support Heartland Alliance this holiday season

HEARTLAND ALLIANCE

SIDETRACK

FULL KIT GEAR YOUR FAVORITE BRANDS EVERYDAY LOW PRICES

JOIN US FOR OUR: HOLIDAY OPEN HOUSE THURSDAY, 12/8 - 6-9PM

YOU KNOW WHAT HE REALLY WANTS THIS HOLIDAY SEASON!

FK GIFT CARDS ALWAYS THE RIGHT FIT

Extended Holiday Hours

LEATHER - RUBBER - SPORT UNDERWEAR - TOYS & ACCESSORIES

FK Full Kit Gear 5021 N Clark Chicago, IL Open 12-9 Daily (773) 657-8000 FULLKIT.COM

Have you been Naughty or Nice?

Find all of your naughty gifts at LEATHER64TEN! Shop in-store or on-line!

LEATHER64TEN CHICAGO 6410 N. CLARK, CHICAGO, IL 773.508.0900 | LEATHER64TEN.COM | @LEATHER64TEN

DANCE from cover

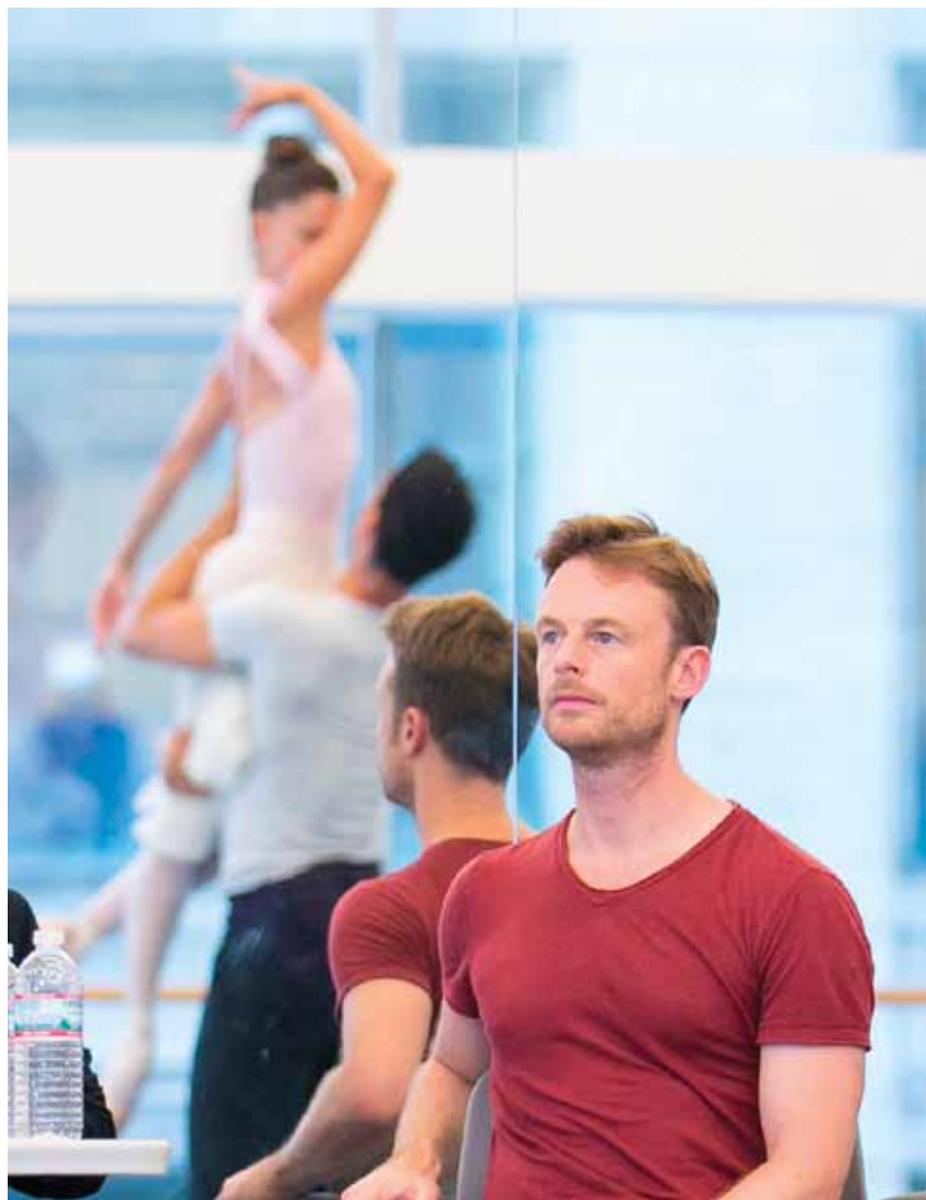
Each is tasked with fulfilling the lofty visions of Tony-award winning director and choreographer Christopher Wheeldon, who with Caldecott-winning author and illustrator Brian Selznick have moved the ballet's setting from an upper-class German living room to a shanty at the fairgrounds on the near south side in 1892 Chicago, the winter before the Columbian Exposition would open. Ms. Katz, Mr. Crouch and Mr. Percy reflected on the artistic process and the realization of Christopher Wheeldon's dream for his *Nutcracker* in electronic correspondence with *Windy City Times*.

"Working with Chris is heaven," wrote Natasha Katz. "I've worked with Chris for over 15 years and I think he makes me a better designer every time I work with him." Ben Percy agreed: "Working with Chris is many things—exciting, challenging, joyful and, above all, great fun. ... He has a wonderful ability to be both demanding and kind and really brings out the best work from his collaborators."

Many choreographers work on the movement first and build design elements in after the dance is formed. The team said the working with Wheeldon is different because he has a vision for lighting, sets, projections and props from early in the process. "Chris is the kind of director who has a very singular vision and is very closely involved with every aspect of his productions," wrote Julian Crouch. "A fair amount of my relationship with Chris is trying to unpick his thoughts and read his mind, because I know the show is already in there... in my opinion he is more theatrically and story minded than many pure [theater] directors that I've worked with."

Working together to tell the story liberates the designers to fully exploit their respective mediums, but it also unites them toward a common goal, meaning no one element speaks louder than another. "It is a collaboration in the deepest sense," wrote Crouch. "The influence we have on each other and the production is constant and equal. I think each one of us want the very best for the production, and are willing to blur the boundaries of our separate skills to achieve a seamless whole." Katz agreed: "Collaboration is everything on this ballet. It's a wonderful mix of scenery, costumes, projection and lighting, choreography, storytelling and music."

For better or worse, the dance world is influenced by ghosts of *Nutcrackers* past. "The *Nutcracker* comes with many expectations," wrote Crouch, "and the greatest challenge was to honor this while simultaneously delivering something fresh and exciting." Christopher Wheeldon takes care to ensure certain needs and expectations are met, partly because they are dictated by his use of the original Tchaikovsky score: the tree will grow; there will be snow, and mice, and a kingdom of worldly delights. It is some of these elements, however,



that have been most difficult to see realized. "The transformation of the tree has been very challenging to get right," said Percy. "It's the marriage of every element of the production, and that integration has to be seamless for it to work."

What is most interesting about this *Nutcracker* team, however, is the relative novelty each brings to the *Nutcracker*. For Katz and Crouch, this is their first *Nutcracker*. Percy drew some influence from a Chicago production at the Arie Crown Theatre in the early 1990s. "I was the assistant lighting designer for Tom Skelton," he said. "That production was very different visually and conceptually from [Wheeldon's] *Nutcracker*, but I did take some inspiration from how the Overture was staged. Tom crafted a story with light on the show curtain that took the audience on a journey through the idyllic town that was painted onto the curtain. I'd like to think that our imagery for the Overture also creates a journey for the audience and brings them into our unique story."



The Broadway-bred group of designers is feeling the idiosyncracies of the dance world, with the most obvious challenge begin time. "Lighting is very exacting and it takes time in the theatre to get the lighting exactly right," wrote Katz. "We have worked very fast, since the vision has been in our collective head for months." Ballet costumes and sets presented unique challenges for Crouch, including that his elements be able to withstand wear and tear over the next several decades. "The Joffrey needs a show that will last a very long time," wrote Crouch. Indeed, the original impetus for commissioning the ballet was one of practicality; when Artistic Director Ashley Wheater took the Joffrey's helm in 2007, he found the quarter century-old sets and costumes of Robert Joffrey's *Nutcracker* (for which he danced the role of Father/Snow King in the 1987 premiere) in tatters.

It may or may not be coincidence that the World's Fair and the *Nutcracker* it inspired have been chock full of challenges, not least of which is Wheeldon's ankle-breaking fall into the orchestra pit in Iowa City (as reported by the *New York Times*). Despite the challenges, the show will go on, as the World's Fair did, and will undoubtedly bring magic, wonder and delight to the masses.

Christopher Wheeldon's *Nutcracker*, presented by the Joffrey Ballet, runs Dec. 10-30 at the Auditorium Theatre, 50 E. Congress Pkwy. For more information and tickets, visit Joffrey.org.

Left: Christopher Wheeldon (seated) with dancers April Daly and Fabrice Calmels in rehearsals for *The Nutcracker*.

Photo by Todd Rosenberg

Below: Costume renderings from *The Nutcracker*.

Courtesy of The Joffrey Ballet



Photos by Kirk Williamson

Santa Speedo Run shows off for charity

Runners braved near-freezing temps to strut their stuff for the Santa Speedo Run, Saturday, December 3, at Sidetrack. The colorful crowd gathered at the bar, screwed up their courage and hit the streets for a one-mile run through Boystown, all in—and out of—their holiday finest.

This sixth-annual event brought in a record \$52,000, to benefit Center On Halsted's Youth Housing Initiative.

After the run, participants and friends warmed up to the emcee stylings of Debbie Fox, as she doled out raffle prizes and auctioned off underwear (and other underthings) from sponsors such as Crochet Empire.

