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One Apartment, Two Very Different 'Nutcrackers'

By JAMES BARRON

This started long before all the stores put up the holiday stuff — before, even, they put up the Halloween stuff. David Parker and Keith Michael's apartment in the West Village has been all Christmas, all the time, since August.

"It's the grueling time," Mr. Michael explained. "It's 'Nutcracker' season."

He and Mr. Parker are choreographers working on two distinctly different versions of "The Nutcracker," the ballet that, for audiences, is a hardy holiday perennial, with Drosselmeyer toys that come to life and even fighting mice.

For dancers, that means rehearsals that start as early as August. For Mr. Parker and Mr. Michael, who first met in the early 1980s when they were both members of an American folk dance company, it means dueling rehearsals in their apartment when other rehearsal spaces are booked. It means, as Mr. Parker put it, "There's a lot of scheduling."

For Mr. Michael, there was more to rehearse this time around. He choreographed a new version of "The Nutcracker" for the New York Theater Ballet. It replaces a "Nutcracker" that the company had performed for 26 years — "Keith's 'Nutcracker,'" Mr. Parker called it, adding, "It has been a constant in my life."

Mr. Parker's version is called "Nut/Cracked," an hour-long piece with 22 scenes that the Bang Group will perform on Dec. 21, 22 and 23 at the Bessie Schönberg Theater on West 19th Street in Chelsea. Some critics have said it is "Nutcracker" reimagined as a funky vaudeville piece with a reinvented pas de deux — two male dancers are in business suits. Mr. Parker himself referred to a "vaudevillian amalgam" with overtones of Fred Astaire, Buster



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The choreographers David Parker, left, and Keith Michael, with members of their companies.

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Keaton and Merce Cunningham.

And probably Mr. Michael. A conversation with the two men leaves the impression that in their household, one occupant influences the other.

"I'm filled with glee that I get to take part in 'The Nutcracker'" through "Nut/Cracked," Mr. Parker said, adding that other dancers dread "Nutcracker" sea-

son because "you feel like you're working the party, not going to the party."

"That I was able to restate it in terms that make sense to me and the community I work in ..." The sentence trailed off, but Mr. Michael picked up where Mr. Parker had begun.

"That idea of glee is something I've been inspired by," he said. "I wanted this to be something that's not, 'Oh, my God, I have a rehearsal!'"

"In a sense, I was competing with myself," said Mr. Michael, who is also the production coordinator for the dance division at the Juilliard School. "I was in it for 10 or 12 years. I was the Drosselmeyer character, so there was a lot of fear: Can I do this again?"

I'm older now. Hopefully, I'm also a better choreographer, so I want this to be more complex." He sees a romance between the daughter of the house and Drosselmeyer's nephew.

That is different from what Mr. Parker sees in "Nut/Cracked."

"I wasn't interested in the second act," Mr. Parker said. "Keith has puzzled over how to make the story work."

But each of their versions is anchored in takeout, Mr. Parker said. For the Chinese dance in his version, there is a single noodle. In Mr. Michael's new version, there will be chopsticks tapping out the rhythm because, as he put it, "What is more Chinese to New Yorkers than Chinese food?"