

# From Cuba to St. Augustine: The Nutcracker Connection

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Five Cuban natives danced together again after many, many years. They were on stage in the Nutcracker, staged in December by St. Augustine Ballet.

Each year, the Ballet invites professional guest artists to perform principal roles in the annual production. In 2014, those chosen were all friends of Artistic Director Luis Abella, who runs Abella's School of Dance here in St. Augustine.

Abella and his friends studied ballet together as children and teens at the National Ballet School of Cuba in Havana. This was the first time they performed on the same stage since leaving Cuba to pursue their careers around the world.

"All of this is a lot of work," Abella said of bringing the Nutcracker to the stage for the sixth year in the Ancient City.

"When you work with people you like, love and trust ... people that carry the same passion, it makes it more fun," he explained.

Arionel Vargas, a principal dancer with the English National Ballet since 2004, returned to reprise his role as the Cavalier. Vargas partnered with his sister, Margit Vargas Rodrigues, as she danced the part of the Sugar Plum Fairy. Her husband, Daet Rodriguez, danced the role of The Prince.

Daet and Margit Rodriguez own and operate the ballet academy, Cuballet Ecuador, and are former dancers with the Ballet of Camaguey in Cuba, and Canada's Royal Winnipeg Ballet. The two will return to St. Augustine this spring to perform in the St. Augustine Ballet's Peter Pan, on stage May 16th in Lewis Auditorium at Flagler College.

Auditions were held on January 17 and rehearsals take place each week until the performance. Local student dancers will make up most of the cast.

"We keep in touch because they have a studio, too," Abella said. "We trade ideas," Abella said. This past year, Daet and Margit Rodriguez brought students from Ecuador to St. Augustine so that they could take ballet workshops at Abella's School of Dance.

"The idea is to have an international partnership. The idea is to have some of them come back and perform here, and I hope we (his students) can go some day to perform in Ecuador," Abella explained.

"We want to establish a bridge between here and there. I want our kids (students) to experience a difference place ... We want to give them the opportunity."

Also on stage in December, Orlando Molina returned for his third year in the role of the mysterious Drosselmeyer. Molina has danced with Ballet Municipal of Lima in Peru, Orlando Ballet and recently accepted the position of School Principal with Georgia Ballet in Atlanta.

"I was excited to introduce my former classmates to our St. Augustine audience," said Abella. "I never imagined we'd be able to perform together again."

Abella's career has also taken him around the world. He is a former dancer with Bellas Artes Nacional of Mexico, the Minnesota Ballet, and the University of Miami Ballet.

St. Augustine Ballet is a 501(c)3 non-profit arts organization dedicated to creating dance opportunities for students of dance and appreciative audiences.

Visit the St. Augustine Ballet Website: <http://www.saintaugustineballet.com/>