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Jewish performers find themselves getting into the Christmas spirit

Isaac Akiba and Noah Baird are both performing locally in well-known holiday classics

By Jules Becker

Jewish performers share in the good feeling and generosity common to all faiths this time of year. As Thanksgiving coincides with the start of Chanukah in 2013, musical actor Noah Baird and dancer Isaac Akiba, for example, are getting an unusually early jump on that ecumenical spirit.

Baird is making the most of the flashy supporting role of hero Ralphie's brother Randy in the snappy tour of the Broadway musical "A Christmas Story" at the Opera House. Boston Ballet wunderkind Akiba will be tackling eight roles in the company's upcoming edition of "The Nutcracker." In separate interviews, both recently spoke to The Advocate about their plans for Chanukah, their current performances and their respective takes on the universal messages of their shows.

Baird, who turns 8 in December, is looking forward to having a holiday get-together at his hotel. The San Diego second-grader, who attends Sunday classes at Temple Solel in that city's suburb of Cardiff, revealed, "We're having a party in the lobby of my hotel. We're going to be lighting Chanukah candles." Parents Daniel and Becky Baird, sister Talia, grandparents and Los Angeles relatives will join Noah for Thanksgiving and Chanukah. While his character of Randy receives a hot air balloon and a fire truck during the musical, Baird looks forward to "a toy helicopter and a Hot Wheels car set for Chanukah." Chanukah is a truly joyous time for him: "We play the dreidel game a lot," he noted.

In fact, when Baird spends Chanukah in San Diego, he indicated that he becomes a kind of second grade Chanukah expert at his High Tech Elementary North Country School: "I teach them (non-Jewish fellow students) games like the Dreidel Game."

He also spoke enthusiastically of the books at his Temple. His favorite has been "The Runaway Clay." The clay is fleeing, he explained, because "[children in the book are] trying to make a dreidel [out of it]."

Baird enjoys performing as much as he celebrates Jewish holidays. In fact, his training is already extensive. "I take tap lessons," he said. "I started when I was 3." Even his substantial acting credits go back to the age of 4. Back in California, under the direction of his mother, Baird played an ensemble child in "Fiddler on the Mountain" and a Munchkin and a Flying Monkey in a production of "The Wizard of Oz."

Other early shows include "Disney's Cinderella" and "Annie."

Now, he proudly remarked, "I am in my first professional production." He is also proud of playing Randy. "My role is really cool," he said. "There are two Ralphies [Josh Lucas and Eli Tokash take turns playing the role] having different emotions."

Baird singled out two unusual moments in the musical. Speaking of Randy's questionable table habits, he observed, "He's kind of annoying. It's gross when Randy puts his head in the potatoes [instead of eating with a fork]. He also pointed to the imaginative number "Ralphie to the Rescue," noting, "The song is really fun and energetic. "I play an Indian who is tied up with a rope [during that part of the show]."

Besides the show's emphasis on family, friendship and childhood memories, Baird enjoys working with award-winning director John Rando (2002 Tony for the musical "Urinetown"). "It's a really cool experience," he admitted. "He's really nice and funny too. He's really good with kids. He'll make us get it right [a line, a move or a number] but not in a mean way."

Rando and company certainly got it right opening night. A first-rate cast – including several original cast members captured the wonder and charm of the Joseph Robinette book, based on the Jean Shepherd memories-based movie of the same name, and the alternately moving and mirthful Benj Pasek-Justin Paul score. Standouts include big-voiced Jake Lucas as Ralphie, the dance strong Baird as Randy, high-kicking John Bolton as The Old Man, tender Erin Dilly as Mother and fervent Dan Lauria as Jean Shepherd. Warren Carlyle's exuberant choreography soars in the show-stopping "Ralphie to the Rescue" and "You'll Shoot Your Eye Out." "A Christmas Story," embracing universal values of family and friendship, is likely to become as much of a regular tradition in its own right as "A Christmas Carol."

Dancing a wide range of roles in the Boston Ballet's "Nutcracker" has become as much of an annual tradition for Isaac Akiba – now in his seventh year with the company – as celebrating Chanukah. The 25-year-old Jamaica Plain soloist, no stranger to multiple roles in the Tchaikovsky classic, is now taking on eight: Party Father, Harlequin Doll, Snow King, Lead Russian, Chinese, Pastoral, Mother Ginger and Nutcracker/ Cavalier.

"For me being Jewish," Akiba reflected, "I can connect with the joy of the holiday times." Planning to celebrate Chanukah with latkes-making father David, mother Jane and sister Abigail on Thanksgiving and day off Monday – "I'm performing practically every day," he observed – he will have his heritage with him all eight days. "I have a menorah app on my phone," he explained.

Akiba also has his identity regularly on his mind. Two years ago he worked with budding Jewish dancers at the Jewish Community Center. Since then he has established a connection with The Vilna Shul's "Havurah on the Hill." Given his very busy performance schedule right now, Akiba is looking to a 2014 event. "I would do something [at 'Havurah'] in February," he predicted tentatively.

Meanwhile, Akiba is ready to do a lot with his toughest roles in "The Nutcracker." Speaking of the role of the Cavalier, he said, "I'm going to try to give it a very spirited performance and the joyousness at the same time." He promised similar intensity dancing Nutcracker. "I want to bring more personality to [the role] and make it more human. I want to make him more youthful."

Speaking of the transformation of heroine Clara's present into a person, he added, "I really like that moment when he comes alive. The music is incredibly beautiful at that moment." Akiba also singled out a regal moment in the snow. "There's one sequence when [Nutcracker] runs in diagonally and lifts Clara, and I try to make that more special."

Asked about the sometimes underrated Pastoral, Akiba submitted, "It's a lot of footwork and you really have to show off your line. My calves really burn [after the Pastoral routine]. It's probably one of the hardest divertissements."

Both performers are equally determined going forward. Baird hopes to work with more Broadway directors. Strikingly specific, he noted, "I want to be in "Les Miserables," "Newsies" and "Mathilda."

Akiba is already lined up to dance the coveted high-leap-rich role of the Jester in next year's "Cinderella" (March 13-23) and the elegant pas de trois of "Emerald" in "Jewels" (May 22-June 1). His other commitments during the company's 50th-anniversary season are yet to be determined.

Ultimately, Akiba said he is as happy with Boston Ballet as with being Jewish. "I plan to stay here [in the Hub]," he vowed.

"A Christmas Story," Citi Performing Arts Center Wang Theatre, Boston, through Dec. 8. Call (866) 348- 9738 or visit www.citicenter.org.

"The Nutcracker," Boston Ballet, Opera House, Boston, through Dec. 29. Call (617) 695-6950 or visit www.bostonballet.org.

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