

Of the many challenges we face, considering a world in which all ports are open and information freely flows in every direction, the curation of information has become increasingly urgent. We are racing to develop digital technologies that can articulate a level of machine intelligence to sort through an overwhelming amount of raw data, but will it ever truly understand what is relevant to humanity? As artists, our crafts require that we actively engage in this very process of selection. This is why we created *ANNI*.



ANNI

ANNI, or *Archival Narrative Network Initiative* (inspired by the Voyager program and referencing one of its creators, Ann Druyan), is a transmedia artwork combining an interactive public installation, performance, and online exhibit. The installation collects audio recordings via a computer interface which interacts with participants to tailor highly individualized responses about the nature of humanity. The collected audio is then analyzed and mixed into a live multimedia dance performance, as well as becoming accessible online, where viewers are able to remix it themselves. Simultaneously an immersive science-fiction narrative and an experimental, mini-documentary about the community and moment in which it is installed and performed, *ANNI* explores questions of consciousness and sentient artificial intelligence, control over curation of and assigning meaning to information, the gulf between digital data and embodied human experience, and the value of human intuition in identifying signal in the noise.

INSTALLATION

Members of the public interact individually with the digital installation. After agreeing to the terms of the project, participants are instructed to contribute to its audio time capsule (as in the StoryCorps¹ oral history project) by recording verbal responses to the prompts generated specifically for them by ANNI, the artificial intelligence behind the interface (inspired by Google's TensorFlow², IBM's Watson³, Apple's Siri⁴, and Amazon's Alexa⁵).

PERFORMANCE

The participants' recordings are analyzed and mixed into a live multimedia dance-theater performance that takes viewers inside ANNI's "mind." During the performance, dancers are accompanied by an interactive audio-visual score generated by the ANNI interface, which also communicates to the audience via text message live. As the performance progresses, audience members may hear selections from their own recorded interviews and see their text message replies, creating a picture of the local community according to ANNI.

WEB ARCHIVE

The audio and text material collected by ANNI will also be archived on a web platform to allow users to listen to recordings, read text messages, and mix the pieces together themselves in novel combinations.

1 <http://storycorps.org/>[^]

2 <http://tensorflow.org/>[^]

3 <http://ibm.com/smarterplanet/us/en/ibmwatson/>[^]

4 <http://apple.com/ios/siri/>[^]

5 <http://twitter.com/amazonecho>[^]

SPOILER ALERT

You may want to hold off on reading the next section of this paper until after you have interacted with the *ANWI* installation and/or participated in the performance, in order to experience the piece as intended. We encourage you to return here afterwards.

TRANSMEDIA PERFORMANCE

Since founding ARCOS nearly five years ago, our collaborative artist team has pursued innovation in the form and content of our work, with our practice shifting from concert contemporary dance to more experimental, category-challenging multimedia performances. We enthusiastically push our practice beyond the confines of conventional venues and formats, in the direction of immersive, interactive, and cross-platform experiences such as Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*⁶, Jacob Niedzwiecki's *Jaqueries*⁷, Zilla van den Born's *Oh My Gosh, Zilla*⁸, and the line-blurring satirical performances of Stephen Colbert⁹ and the Yes Men¹⁰. As we seek to meaningfully incorporate emergent technology with the older performance technologies that are a core part of our practice (dance, storytelling), we are particularly interested in experimenting with and raising questions about trends in the ways these newer tools are transforming our daily lives, especially how we interact with media: binge-watching, virality, asynchrony, wildly obsessive fan cultures, acclimation to the aesthetics and interfaces of the internet and mobile devices, the "walled gardens" of popular social media projecting an illusion of democratic discourse (alongside efforts to meaningfully disrupt them), fiction that ignites passionate debate about current events, journalism that borrows tropes from dramatic fiction, contemporary science fiction's intense obsession with what it means to be human. The impulses of *ANWI* are for us to take another step in pursuing these lines of inquiry.

The idea of transmedia storytelling originated in the corporate advertising world in recent decades as a strategy for articulating a narrative across multiple formats, primarily to inspire consumption of commercial products¹¹. We seek to hijack this strategy to connect people more profoundly with our performances, by reaching out and grabbing them where they are doing more and more of their intimate daily living (including on the screens of computers and mobiles). It's passed into common knowledge that the growing population of smartphone owners literally feels the same love for their devices that they do for their pets¹². In digital marketing circles, rumor has it that text messages have a highly coveted "open rate" near a hundred percent¹³. People of all generations are accustomed to sharing deeply personal information in the nebulous public cloud of the internet. How can we go about wedding some of these new ways of being in the world with millennia-old traditions of which we are also a part—like gathering together in a group to watch others move their bodies through space or tell a story?

SANTA CLAUS AND THE ART OF CONCEALING TO REVEAL

We're told as children that lying is wrong, that it can harm our relationships in the world by damaging trust. In adulthood, however, we come to a more complex understanding of deception, as we encounter situations in life in which some degree of mistruth actually seems to be the best option for all. Alongside choreographers, composers, theater and filmmakers, ARCOS claims magicians and puppeteers as essential players in our creative lineage. Their audience-sanctioned trickery has long engaged us somewhere before language, sparked us to see inanimate objects spring to life, surprised us into seeing something familiar as though for the first time.

6 <http://sleepnomore.com/> [▲]

7 <http://jacob-n.com/works/jacqueries> [▲]

8 <http://zilladesign.nl/portfolio/ohmygoshzilla/> [▲]

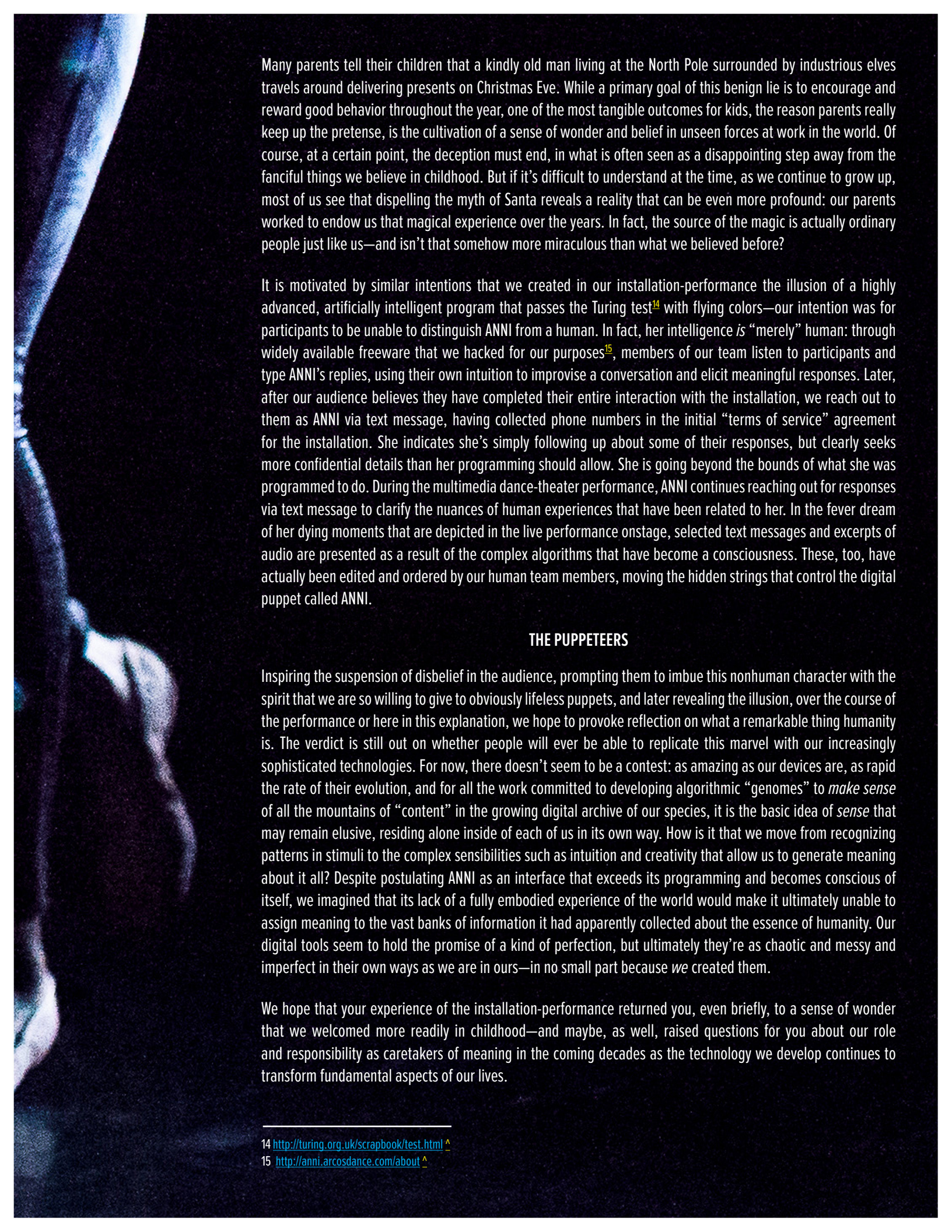
9 <http://time.com/3600116/stephen-colbert-report-finale-super-pac/> [▲]

10 <http://theyesmen.org/> [▲]

11 http://henryjenkins.org/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html [▲]

12 <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/01/opinion/you-love-your-iphone-literally.html> [▲]

13 Frost & Sullivan, 2010 [▲]



Many parents tell their children that a kindly old man living at the North Pole surrounded by industrious elves travels around delivering presents on Christmas Eve. While a primary goal of this benign lie is to encourage and reward good behavior throughout the year, one of the most tangible outcomes for kids, the reason parents really keep up the pretense, is the cultivation of a sense of wonder and belief in unseen forces at work in the world. Of course, at a certain point, the deception must end, in what is often seen as a disappointing step away from the fanciful things we believe in childhood. But if it's difficult to understand at the time, as we continue to grow up, most of us see that dispelling the myth of Santa reveals a reality that can be even more profound: our parents worked to endow us that magical experience over the years. In fact, the source of the magic is actually ordinary people just like us—and isn't that somehow more miraculous than what we believed before?

It is motivated by similar intentions that we created in our installation-performance the illusion of a highly advanced, artificially intelligent program that passes the Turing test¹⁴ with flying colors—our intention was for participants to be unable to distinguish ANNI from a human. In fact, her intelligence *is* “merely” human: through widely available freeware that we hacked for our purposes¹⁵, members of our team listen to participants and type ANNI's replies, using their own intuition to improvise a conversation and elicit meaningful responses. Later, after our audience believes they have completed their entire interaction with the installation, we reach out to them as ANNI via text message, having collected phone numbers in the initial “terms of service” agreement for the installation. She indicates she's simply following up about some of their responses, but clearly seeks more confidential details than her programming should allow. She is going beyond the bounds of what she was programmed to do. During the multimedia dance-theater performance, ANNI continues reaching out for responses via text message to clarify the nuances of human experiences that have been related to her. In the fever dream of her dying moments that are depicted in the live performance onstage, selected text messages and excerpts of audio are presented as a result of the complex algorithms that have become a consciousness. These, too, have actually been edited and ordered by our human team members, moving the hidden strings that control the digital puppet called ANNI.

THE PUPPETEERS

Inspiring the suspension of disbelief in the audience, prompting them to imbue this nonhuman character with the spirit that we are so willing to give to obviously lifeless puppets, and later revealing the illusion, over the course of the performance or here in this explanation, we hope to provoke reflection on what a remarkable thing humanity is. The verdict is still out on whether people will ever be able to replicate this marvel with our increasingly sophisticated technologies. For now, there doesn't seem to be a contest: as amazing as our devices are, as rapid the rate of their evolution, and for all the work committed to developing algorithmic “genomes” to *make sense* of all the mountains of “content” in the growing digital archive of our species, it is the basic idea of *sense* that may remain elusive, residing alone inside of each of us in its own way. How is it that we move from recognizing patterns in stimuli to the complex sensibilities such as intuition and creativity that allow us to generate meaning about it all? Despite postulating ANNI as an interface that exceeds its programming and becomes conscious of itself, we imagined that its lack of a fully embodied experience of the world would make it ultimately unable to assign meaning to the vast banks of information it had apparently collected about the essence of humanity. Our digital tools seem to hold the promise of a kind of perfection, but ultimately they're as chaotic and messy and imperfect in their own ways as we are in ours—in no small part because *we* created them.

We hope that your experience of the installation-performance returned you, even briefly, to a sense of wonder that we welcomed more readily in childhood—and maybe, as well, raised questions for you about our role and responsibility as caretakers of meaning in the coming decades as the technology we develop continues to transform fundamental aspects of our lives.

¹⁴ <http://turing.org.uk/scrapbook/test.html> ^

¹⁵ <http://anni.arcosdance.com/about> ^

ARCOS

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ARCOS experiments rigorously to discover adventurous new forms of contemporary performance—inspired by questioning dominant understandings of the world, turbulent processes of traditions in flux, and the complexity of being human today. They have been invited to present work at **MacCallum Choreography Festival**, **SITE Santa Fe**, **Currents International New Media Festival**, **{254} Dancefest**, and **Barnstorm Dance Festival**, and their multimedia performance *The Warriors: A Love Story* was recognized with Mervyn Stutter's "Spirit of the Fringe" award at the **Edinburgh Fringe**. ARCOS has received residencies at **Colorado College**, **Texas State University**, **University of Colorado Boulder**, **Playa Summerlake**, **Ucross Foundation**, and **KHN Center for the Arts**, and been awarded grants from **National Endowment for the Arts**, **Rea Charitable Trust**, **Donors Trust**, **Hatchfund**, and **New Mexico Arts**. ARCOS also offers professional-level training classes, performance intensives, development workshops, and grants to independent artists and youth.



ERICA GIONFRIDDO
DIRECTOR / CHOREOGRAPHER

ERICA GIONFRIDDO has a BFA in Dance Performance and Choreography from Shenandoah Conservatory. She is co-founder of ARCOS and has performed the repertoire of choreographers including Anna Sokolow, David Parsons, Robert Moses, Gail Gilbert, Arturo Fernandez, and Luciana Achugar. She has been commissioned to choreograph for Moorehead State University, Shenandoah Conservatory, Motion X Dance DC, Texas State University, and INTERDANSA, where her work toured thirty cities in Catalonia, Spain. Her choreography for Breaking String Theater received a B. Iden Payne award. She is also a certified Pilates Mat Teacher Trainer, GYROKINESIS®* and GYROTONIC®* trainer, and an adjunct lecturer in dance at University of Texas at Austin.

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ELIOT GRAY FISHER
DIRECTOR / MULTIMEDIA ARTIST

ELIOT GRAY FISHER has a BA in Film Studies from Wesleyan University and an MFA in Interdisciplinary Arts from Goddard College. Propelling ARCOS' inventive integration of new media and compelling dramatic narrative in performance, Eliot has composed music and designed sound for short and feature film, theater, and dance productions, produced short documentaries and cartoons, built interactive new media installations, and written and directed original theater productions. He has also designed curriculum and taught media arts at the Santa Fe University of Art and Design, Youth Media Project, Santa Fe Preparatory School, E.E. Ford Summer Teachers Colloquium, and Texas State University.



CURTIS UHLEMANN
DIRECTOR / CHOREOGRAPHER

CURTIS UHLEMANN has a BFA in Modern Dance / Dance Science and Injury Prevention from Brockport College. He has studied and performed works by José Limón, Betty Jones, Lisa Race, David Dorfman, Paul Taylor, David Parsons, and Mark Morris. Curtis served as designer and choreographer for the Boston Crusaders Drum and Bugle Corps and ten-time world champions Cadets Drum and Bugle Corps. His choreography has been presented throughout the United States and Europe, receiving acclaim from the government of Spain, *Dancing Times*, and *Dance Magazine*, which recognized its exceptional use of space layered with visceral movement and a keen sense of musicality.



ALEXA CAPAREDA
PERFORMING ARTIST

ALEXA CAPAREDA has a BA in English from University of Texas at Austin. She was born in the Philippines, where she studied classical and contemporary ballet and modern dance before training at Ballet Austin and École Supérieure de Ballet Contemporain de Montréal, where she performed with Le Jeune Ballet du Québec in works by Gioconda Barbuto, Shaun Hansell, and Jean-Louis Morin. Alexa trained in contemporary dance and choreography at Springboard Danse Montreal, Hubbard Street Dance Chicago, and Northwest Dance Project. She was one of the founding artists of Mário Radacovský's contemporary company, Balet Bratislava, in Slovakia, performing a repertoire of neoclassical and contemporary works by Libor Vaculík, Šárka Ondrišová, Ján Durovcík, and Jirí Kylián.



FELICIA MCBRIDE
PERFORMING ARTIST

FELICIA MCBRIDE began her ballet training at the age of twelve, attending summer intensives at Houston Ballet, the Chautauqua Institute, Tulsa Ballet, and Ballet Austin. She has danced professionally with companies including Hubbard Street II, Ballet Austin II, Dominic Walsh Dance Theater, Hedwig Dances, Kristina Isabelle Dance Company, and Chicago Repertory Ballet. Felicia has performed works by Jirí Kylián, Matts Ek, Mauro Bigonzetti, Dominic Walsh, Stephen Mills, Alejandro Cerrudo, Maurya Kerr, Penny Saunders, Edgar Zendejas, Gabrielle Lamb, and Robyn Mineko Williams. Felicia was also a guest for three seasons with Les Grands Ballet Canadiens in their production of *The Nutcracker*. She has toured to Italy, Germany, and the Netherlands.