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The Fancy Brigades march to Arch

Celebrating its 15th year at the Pennsylvania Convention Center, the final preparations are in the works for the Fancy Brigade Finale Show.

By Mark Moss

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Come New Year's Day, the Mummies' Fancy Brigades will be strutting their stuff in front of a packed house of fans and judges.

This is the first in a three-part series previewing the Jan. 1 Fancy Brigade Finale Show at the Pennsylvania Convention Center.

Who are the Fancy Brigades?

The year 1960 was a tumultuous year. A year that the world turned from the Norman Rockwell innocence of the 1950s to increased global tension. That same year, the Soviet Union shot down an American U-2 spy plane. President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed into law the Civil Rights Act. While the entire world was coming to grips with this newfound turmoil, Philadelphia found comfort within its city limits in the controlled chaos of the Mummers Parade.

The Mummers Parade is a yearly event dating back to colonial days, with roots in Greek, Roman and Egyptian history, but its traditions are more commonly related to Northern European settlers. In Philadelphia, this must-see attraction for residents and tourists alike was officially organized as a parade in 1901.

The Fancy Brigades at one time were part of the larger Fancy Division, also referred to as the mother club. While existing long before, they officially came into existence in 1947 and are now, one of the five divisions making up the Philadelphia Mummers.

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The Fancy Brigades recently celebrated its 51st anniversary as an organized association.

In '60, unlike the worldwide confusion going on around them, the brigades decided to band together and establish the Fancy Brigade Association. Organizing the individual clubs under a unit of solidarity enabled the groups to have a singular voice, assuring themselves the best possible avenue to prosper.

Over the years, Fancy Brigade performances evolved from simple, themed presentations with an emphasis on beautiful costumes, to pitch-perfect performances organized around massive floats

The brigades continued to grow at impressive lengths and in '77, they made an unprecedented decision that would change not only their destiny but that of the entire parade. They decided to break away from the mother clubs and petition the city for a charter and form their own division: The Fancy Brigade Division.

The newly formed brigade division's shows grew larger and more spectacular. In the '90s, aside from its performing membership, a typical Brigade show would have an exhausting routine, surrounded by building size floats. With shows on a grander scale, it now became a problem to move them up South Broad Street for the long trek to City Hall.

In '97, the Fancy Brigade Association sought a solution by moving the festivities to the Pennsylvania Convention Center. Opened four years earlier, it had ample room, was rarely in use during the last week of the year and was a perfect fit for the lavish productions.

With the oversized props being susceptible to inclement weather and hazardous winds, the brigades, together, voted to move the show indoors. The relocation also offered comfortable, reserved seating, out of the elements, with the insurance of a guaranteed show.

The yearly Fancy Brigades' shows are masterpieces of entertainment. So much goes into the execution of the event that members have become experts at juggling work schedules and home life, along with children's soccer games and school activities. The planning starts almost immediately after New Year's Day. The skill behind the designing, costuming, choreography, lush musical orchestrations and float preparation would make many professional designers, music coordinators and architects envious.

The floats utilized in their shows each year, rival any set or backdrop from a multimillion-dollar Broadway show. The brilliance of the brigades lies in its building and use of props. These floats are designed by everyday, blue-collar people, yet are feats of engineering genius that many would probably spend thousands of dollars and years of education on acquiring the knowledge and know-how to build.

With the massive scale of brigade shows growing, the move indoors was an inevitable remedy and a much-needed boost to the city's economy. As the Convention Center location was secured, the local tourism bureaus, as well as hotels and area restaurants jumped on board, offering packages that included New Year's Eve dinners, parties and overnight stays, along with the added bonus of tickets for a guaranteed, reserved seat to the indoor spectacle. This also offered greater awareness of the Fancy Brigades, the Mummers as a whole and the City of Philadelphia as a must-stop destination for tourists.

Brigade members spend the entire year planning, drilling, costume fitting and building. Some see Christmas as a speed bump on the way to MummersFest.

MummersFest is an event held every year for the general public from Dec. 28 to 31. During that time, tourists, fans, family and friends gain access to the behind-the-scenes preparations for what will be the Fancy Brigades' New Year's Day Mummers Finale.

The public gets to see how hard the brigades and its membership have worked all year to put on one of the most spectacular shows on the planet.



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