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REVIEW

ballet.*magazine**Oakland Ballet**'The Nutcracker'**December 2010**Oakland, Paramount Theater**by Renee Renouf*

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Whatever else the new Artistic Director of Oakland Ballet may be, he's spot on in curtain speeches. Acknowledging Sally Streets' picture in the back stage corridor of Oakland's Paramount Theater where the first of four performances were scheduled between December 23 and December 26, he added the name of Sonya del Waide, heading the dance department at Mills College, before acknowledging the fiscal sponsorship of some of the biggie corporations situated

In the East Bay. His comment about the sunny day in the Bay Area would be considered summer in England was quite endearing.

Lustig has named not only the Stahlbaums in the program, but the guests, adding Cousin Vera and The Cadet as romantic interest in Act I. Their flirtation is viewed through broad back windows where traipsing to the party is seen instead of before the curtain. The family preparation is shown us while the guests arrive in the background, trudging through the snow. It's quite a winsome touch.

After the Victorian clutter of the Guidi Nutcracker set, Lustig's designs by Zack Brown speak of The early Twentieth century in Europe just as

Tomasson's reflects a similar period in San Francisco. The furniture is cream colored, the costumes are light and flow nicely, though greys, pale blues and black and white reflect a period in Vienna that inspired Lustig's reading of the holiday staple. There is much more of the gemutlich, the family eating at the table.

The placing of gifts occurs front and center stage, as if the tree were somewhere above the orchestra pit and the grown ups participate instead of having it already assembled. There are moments when the stage almost gets cluttered, but one can attribute that to the shallow stage of the Paramount Theater. In restoring the Art Deco monument to its former glory, apparently funds were not sufficiently available to purchase the property behind for needed stage expansion.

Marie is engagingly portrayed by Stephanie Salts, small, expressive, slightly reminiscent of Abra Rudisell, much admired former principal, with Oakland Ballet. Salt has a major job in fighting off the mice, requiring her to climb on her couch bench and on the dining room table; the encounter is close up and center, but ultimately she is assisted by Nutcracker danced with youthful good manners by Connolly Strombeck. They carried the major responsibilities in the ballet, dancing a pas de deux in the snow scene where students became snow balls and the women of the company were costumed like Russian snow maidens with tiaras and gowns in Directoire style.

The major role of Drosselmeyer was assigned to tall, slender Damon Mahoney, who reads the story of the Nutcracker to the children, rather than performing the routine magic; he does arrive with a swirling cape. That is a given in all productions. He sends Marie and the Nutcracker off to the Kingdom of Sweets in a balloon.

Cousin Vera and the Cadet, danced by Rachel Speidel Little and Jenkyns Pelaez, metamorphose into the Sugar Plum Fairy and her Cavalier. Sarah Bukowski transforms herself from Mrs. Stahlbaum into the Arabian houri and Aaron Pearlstein veers from Mr. Kokoshka into her Arabian partner. Ikolo Griffin, perhaps the strongest male technician in the ballet, goes from being Mr. Keppel to partnering Emily Kerr and Jackie McConnell in the German variation, better known as the Mirliton music. One hopes the spring season will see his talents more fully engaged.

When the curtain went up on Act II, the audience were treated to the happy spectacle of long-limbed dancers, tunics swirl like lollipops and candy cane colors with the students dressed like expensive silver-wrapped European bon-bons.

There was a cute moment when some junior mice arrived to continue plaguing Marie, but the Sugar Plum Fairy wagged her finger at them and they obediently retreated into the wings. Her costume as depicted on the

program cover was missing its sleeves, but the tutu skirt sported an elegant green design. Little was engaging in Act I as Cousin Vera, but in the grand pas de deux her smile and stamina were definitely strained by the end of the adagio, and there were indications that her back lacked flexibility. Pelaez was an attentive partner, but seemed more labored than in his Diablo Ballet roles.

Given the tribulations of Oakland Ballet, Lustig did an admirable job in this first task of revitalizing the forty-year old East Bay icon. Given his plans for a spring season, a dance camp and a workshop for choreography, Lustig joins Bay Area Dance life like a bracing breeze, most welcome.

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