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# Review: Oakland Ballet's 'Nutcracker' toys around delightfully with a classic

By Jennifer Modenessi Contra Costa Times Posted: 12/24/2010 11:44:40 AM PST Updated: 12/25/2010 07:08:51 AM PST

From the moment the curtain rose on the Oakland Ballet Company's Thursday afternoon premiere of "Graham Lustig's The Nutcracker" at the Paramount Theatre, it was clear that the veteran dance organization is looking toward the future, and not at the past.

Gone are the hoop skirts, corsets and precious ornamentation of the Victorian era, where previous "Nutcrackers," including Oakland Ballet founder Ron Guidi's acclaimed version of the holiday classic, have been set.

New artistic director Graham Lustig moves the ballet to 1910, a few years after the dawn of the 20th century. Balancing his reverence of classic dance with his passion for the contemporary, Lustig has injected this "Nutcracker" with a sophisticated, elegant modernity.

The crowd seemed appreciative and offered a warm, enthusiastic response to the fresh spark Lustig and the new troupe have given the more than 40-year-old company.

Attended by families and members of the East Bay dance community, including Mills College dance professor Sonya Delwaide, whom Lustig thanked preshow for furnishing the Oakland Ballet with a place to rehearse on the Mills campus, the afternoon performance opened where original "Nutcracker" author E.T.A. Hoffman's story kicks off: at a Christmas party.

The hosts are Mr. and Mrs. Stahlbaum, played by the graceful Sarah Bukowski and dapper Jacob Kreamer, and their children Fritz, a wickedly mischievous Kevin Atkinson, and Marie, danced with

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Damon Mahoney as Uncle Drosselmeyer, center, gets the children's attention... ( D. ROSS CAMERON )

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youthful sweetness by Stephanie Salts. Partygoers in jackets, trousers and flowing, unfussy dresses alternately dip and sway while keeping an eye on their rambunctious children in the Stahlbaum's Secession, or Viennese art nouveau style living room.

Cousin Vera, a new character introduced by Lustig and danced by the Joffrey-trained Rachel Speidel Little, and her handsome suitor, the Cadet, played by Diablo Ballet's Jekyins Pelaez, are clearly the stars of the party, at least in Marie's eyes. She gazes dreamily at the enamored pair, imagining herself with her own sweetheart someday. But everything changes when mysterious and magical Uncle Drosselmeyer appears.

Lustig doesn't exactly deviate from the well-known tale, which continues with Drosselmeyer's gift of a wooden toy soldier to his niece. But several spectacular touches give you the feeling you haven't seen this "Nutcracker" before.

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Set and costume designer Zack Brown's pared-down backgrounds allow for Fritz's silhouetted battle that foreshadows the sword fight between the Nutcracker and the Rat King. Busby Berkeley-style snow balls, danced by students, provide a whimsical, comedic counterpoint to the ethereal snow maidens waltzing in a silver-birch forest.

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And it's a hot-air balloon shaped like a Christmas ornament, instead of the traditional sled, that whisks Marie and her Nutcracker-turned-Prince off to the ballet's second act.

It was during the second act -- with its series of folk dances, waltzes and the passionate (and technically daunting) pas de deux by the Sugar Plum fairy and her cavalier -- that just what distinguishes Lustig's "Nutcracker" from the pack became apparent. From the totally modern -- and sensuous -- spin on the athletic Arabian dance, to the classic Hollywood glamour (think Esther Williams and her aquatic dancers) of the Waltz of the Flowers, the demanding intricacy and broad versatility of Lustig's choreography shone through.

I can't wait to see what he and the Oakland Ballet Company dream up next.

### Dance Review

**WHAT: "Graham Lustig's The Nutcracker" by the Oakland Ballet Company**  
**WHERE: Paramount Theatre, 2025 Broadway, Oakland.**  
**WHEN: 2 p.m. Dec. 26. A Sweet Dreams party follows the matinee, for an extra \$10**  
**TICKETS: \$15-\$50; 510-465-6400, 1-800-745-3000 or [www.ticketmaster.com](http://www.ticketmaster.com).**

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"Busby Berkeley-style snow balls, danced by students, provide a whimsical, comedic counterpoint to the ethereal snow maidens waltzing in a silver-birch forest." Yup. The snowballs were perfect and charming today!

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