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Passing years bring change, but 'The Nutcracker' tradition endures in Oakland

By **Angela Woodall**
Oakland Tribune
Posted: 12/25/2010 12:01:00 AM PST
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OAKLAND -- Longtime ballet patron Don Monaco first watched the Oakland Ballet Company perform Tchaikovsky's "The Nutcracker" at the Paramount Theatre 18 years ago.

He has not missed a season since. "I used to think every three years was enough," he said. The world of ballet began to captivate Monaco, little by little, as he watched the energy and love the troupe put into "The Nutcracker." Over the years, he saw children hardly old enough to master the mechanics of tying a shoelace grow into graceful dancers who traveled the world. He watched Devon and Bianca, the daughters of former Oakland A's Manager Tony La Russa, dance parts in the holiday classic. La Russa, his wife and some players with the A's appeared on stage in various roles. Even one-time Raiders offensive lineman Lincoln Kennedy made an appearance.

Monaco still has the old programs.

"The wonderful thing is that it hasn't changed," said Monaco, a retired Orinda resident whose mother was a ballerina. The 74-year-old spent most of his adult life flying around the world as a pilot for Pan American airlines. "It's the best I've seen," he said of the Oakland Ballet's "Nutcracker."

This year, however, the company is under a new artistic director, Graham Lustig. The dancers are new as well.

Lustig's version, dance historian Joanna Harris said, is "visually new, innovative, fresh."

"It's charming," added Judy Job, a dance instructor.

But the magic remains the

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same nearly half a century after Ronn Guidi founded the company in 1965. The Oakland East Bay Symphony continues to provide the live music -- a "Nutcracker" tradition in Oakland. The spell cast by sugar plum fairies, dancing nutcrackers battling evil rat kings and the enigmatic Herr Drosselmeyer was still strong enough to turn Thursday afternoon's matinee premiere into an event worthy of red velvet and ruffles.

"I want to go into the 'Nutcracker,'" squealed 2-year-old Onatha Duvrenell, as snow maidens twirled across the Paramount stage, disguised as a frozen forest. A balloon descended to carry away the lead character, Marie, and her prince to a magical

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Don Monaco, right, a long-time patron of the Oakland Ballet, chats up Ikolo Griffin, part of the...

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"The costumes are out of this world," first-time patron Barbara Clement said. The Oakland resident brought her 4-year-old granddaughter so she could experience "The Nutcracker" firsthand. Before Thursday, the girl had only seen videos and heard the score.

In contrast, Jerry Kraft has driven from Concord for the annual holiday performance since 1995. He took a break from his duties as an usher during the intermission to sit down. "Each year, it's different," he said.

The opening Thursday marked the end of a long transition that began when the Oakland Ballet found itself without an artistic director in 2009. The company performed "The Nutcracker" last year, but they danced with the Peninsula Ballet Theatre under the direction of its artistic director, Carlos Carvajal.

Thursday also marked the beginning of a tradition for Julia Rane, 6. Like many of the other children, she walked straight from her seat to buy a toy nutcracker in the lobby.

"I got the one with the sword," she said, holding up the 6-inch wooden doll.

"Yes," she said emphatically about returning next year. But, she added, next year she would bring her little sister.

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