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Oakland Ballet 'Nutcracker' review: beguiling mix

Allan Ulrich, Chronicle Dance Correspondent
Saturday, December 25, 2010

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Carlos Avila Gonzalez / The Chronicle

Graham Lustig's "Nutcracker" enchants with its blend of tradition and whimsy.

Just one more "Nutcracker" to go before we store it with our memories for another year. Fortunately, Graham Lustig's staging of this family classic, new to the [Bay Area](#), mixes tradition with whimsy and looks beguiling. It may be the work that helps to restore the [Oakland Ballet Company](#) to its former glory.

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At Thursday afternoon's opening performance, it was heartening to see the Paramount stage come alive with dancing children, who, in this version, are active participants rather than mobile props in the familiar narrative. We got batteries of bouncing snowballs in the snow scene, and an army of

miniature mice (too cute to slay) in the epic rodent war. They leave no doubt that Lustig believes that "Nutcracker," whatever its choreographic pedigree, is very much an annual ritual that draws the entire community.

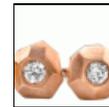
The afternoon involved a measure of visual dislocation. It was a mite strange to be enchanted with two bold design styles from the past colliding with each other. Offstage, one was immersed in the theater's magnificent gilded [Art Deco](#) ambience; within the proscenium, designer Zack Brown's elegant re-creation of a Viennese Moderne living room, white and spacious, with an omnipresent inlay border, offered a suitable launching pad for a magical tale.

Lustig, the new artistic director of the Oakland Ballet Company, created this "Nutcracker" for [New Jersey's](#) American Repertory Ballet in 2000, and he slightly tweaks the standard format. His protagonist, Marie, remains at the center of the story to the end. She dreams, slays the Rat King, falls for the [Nutcracker Prince](#), and, rather than watching the Act 2 divertissement from the sidelines, she dances in a couple of them, including the waltz of the flowers.

Lustig carefully defines her character through movement. The first duet with the prince,

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in contrast with the grand pas de deux, clearly represents the exploratory gestures of an adolescent. When Marie spares a few surviving mice at the end, you come to terms with her burgeoning humanity.

Lustig has conceived this "Nutcracker" in intimate terms; only six flowers populate the waltz, and it works. What he doesn't quite do is bring Uncle Drosselmeyer into focus (the costume is not Brown's most inventive), though it was a delight to watch dancer Damon Mahoney strut on stilts in the Polichinelle divertissement.

For contrast's sake, Lustig switches the placement of this episode with the waltz. Otherwise, it's all Tchaikovsky in the order he wrote it. Thursday, Michael Morgan conducted members of the Oakland East Bay Symphony in an utterly empathetic, infinitely flexible reading of the score.

Steph Stalts impressed as Marie, as much for her fresh, spunky acting as for her clean technique. Her Nutcracker Prince, Connolly Strombeck, proved an ideal partner, though Lustig deprives him of the mimed narrative. Rachel Speidel Little's Sugar Plum Fairy suggested graciousness and warmth in her variation, where Jekyns Pelaez brought his reliable technique to the cavalier. Aaron Perlstein did double duty handsomely as the Rat King and in the Arabian duet with the infinitely extended Sarah Bukowski.

Still, technical levels vary sharply in this "Nutcracker." Lustig has his work cut out for him in Oakland.

Oakland Ballet: Graham Lustig's "Nutcracker." 2 p.m. Sun. Paramount Theatre of the Arts, 2025 Broadway, Oakland. \$35-\$50. (800) 745-3000. www.ticketmaster.org.

E-mail Allan Ulrich at datebookletters@sfgchronicle.com.

This article appeared on page E - 1 of the San Francisco Chronicle

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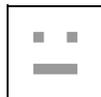
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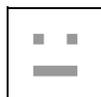
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oaklandmamma 12:47 PM on December 27, 2010

Our whole family loved this performance. From the beautiful music, to the wonderful dancers, the very talented and disciplined children, to the most spectacular theater in the Bay Area. I highly recommend the Oakland Ballet's Nutcracker! We'll make this an annual tradition.

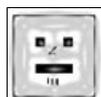
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steverinoo 11:18 PM on December 25, 2010

The really weird thing is (in order to to give the show Oakland-style street cred) they off Clara in the 2nd act. It just doesn't make sense!?!)

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spell_check 11:30 AM on December 25, 2010

These photos look chosen to illustrate the company's "varied technical levels" when compared to the Trib's pictures of the same performance - a lesson in editorial misdirection or photographic mistiming.

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