

'Nutcracker' review: Oakland Ballet charms

Steven Winn

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The Oakland Ballet Company's sunny, perky version of "The Nutcracker" sparks a rooting interest in the troupe. Right from the start, with a mischief-filled pantomime scene that ends in a snowball fight before the Tchaikovsky Overture is through, artistic director Graham Lustig's staging of the holiday staple at the Paramount Theatre projects a playful but determined will to succeed.

That's just the right tone for a financially challenged company that's been down but never out for good in recent years. By trimming its "Nutcracker" performances to three, from last year's overly ambitious five, Oakland Ballet hopes to cut costs and take in \$200,000 this year. Board President Roz Perazzo said this year's canceled performances of "Diaghilev Imagery" are on for May. "At this point our plan is to be simple and fiscally responsible," Perazzo added, "and build from there."

Demure, quietly magnetic and budding with romantic urges, Stephanie Salts' Marie is the glowing center of attention in the "Nutcracker's" mobile party scene. Even as her cantankerous brother Fritz (a tightly wired Cole Companion) rockets around the busy room wreaking havoc, Marie and several of the other girls train their attention on Marie's older cousin Vera (Chantelle Pianetta) and her Cadet beau (Bobby Briscoe).

Clever storytelling

Shyly copying Vera's yielding postures and arabesques, the girls tried to imagine their young bodies as hers. It's a lovely, yearning touch. So is the way the other girls cradle their toys, just as Marie does her adored new Nutcracker. Marie, in her dreamy way, is a role model just as Vera is.

Lustig and his lively ensemble are clear and clever storytellers. The Nutcracker Prince becomes a flesh-and-blood, make-believe man (the charming, innocently gallant Cameron Findley) with a quick sweep of Drosselmeyer's cape (the spry, imposingly tall Damon Mahoney plays the magically inclined uncle).

The rodent battle scene is both fearsome and comic - a combination potent enough to still the restive children in the audience. Designer Zack Brown supplies a giant wilting cake and outsize fractured tea cup as bunkers for the warring parties. The Rat King (Marte Madera) stabs himself in the toe with his own weapon before meeting his end when brave Marie does him in with a giant table knife. It's quite a spectacle, crawling and scurrying with big-headed rats.

Brown's cartoon-look scenery effects a neat fusion of indoor and outdoor, the domestic and the wild, erotically tinted realm of Marie's dream. The tree that grows here is a forest one, heavy with snow-laden boughs. The snow scene is at once fanciful, full of floating Snowmaidens and bulbous Snowball costumes, and tangible, with the slender, bending birch trees that materialize in the backdrop. Salts and Findley find an unhurried, flowing grace in this sweetly transformed place. They take off together even before they depart in Drosselmeyer's giant balloon.

Act Two's costumes

Act Two, with its emphasis on around-the-world bravura dancing, is less successful. Lustig supplies some beguiling choreography, notably in the sinuous Arabian scene, with its witty, Mummenschanz-y use of a filmy drape. But the dancers, here and elsewhere in the speciality numbers, often fall short in both style and execution. Brown's inventive, lavish costumes are the main attraction. Pianetta and Briscoe, as the Sugar Plum Fairy and Cavalier, remain largely earthbound in their grand pas de deux. Annika Barlow earns bonus points as the impish Tiny Clown.

The variable dancing focuses deserved attention on the contributions of the Oakland East Bay Symphony. Under Michael Morgan's sensitive baton, the orchestra paints one exotic picture after another in the second act, each one brimming with well-balanced orchestral colors. The Mount Eden High School women's ensemble adds a vocal shimmer to the Frozen Forest scene.

This "Nutcracker" is a communal effort all around, by a company and a city that are trying hard to make the long tradition of ballet matter and endure in Oakland.

The Nutcracker: Final performance of the Oakland Ballet Company production is at 11 a.m. Monday. Paramount Theatre, 2025 Broadway, Oakland. 2 hours, 10 minutes. Tickets: \$20-\$59.50. (800) 745-3000, www.oaklandballet.org.

Steven Winn is a freelance writer. E-mail: datebookletters@sfgchronicle.com

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